STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

10¢

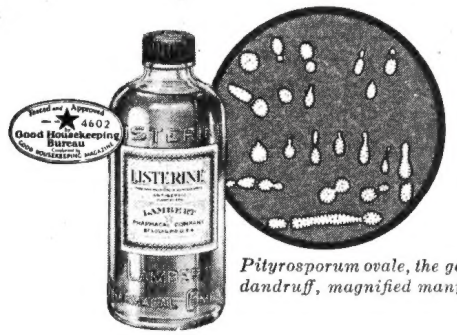
FEB. 4, 1939

STARTING A NEW SERIAL

ACES COME HIGH

BY JACKSON GREGORY

Get rid of that telltale DANDRUFF for keeps—with LISTERINE



Pityrosporum ovale, the germ that causes dandruff, magnified many times.

Sensational discovery that a germ causes dandruff leads to antiseptic therapy. Listerine Antiseptic relieves and masters dandruff, tests prove. 76% of patients of New Jersey clinic got amazing relief.

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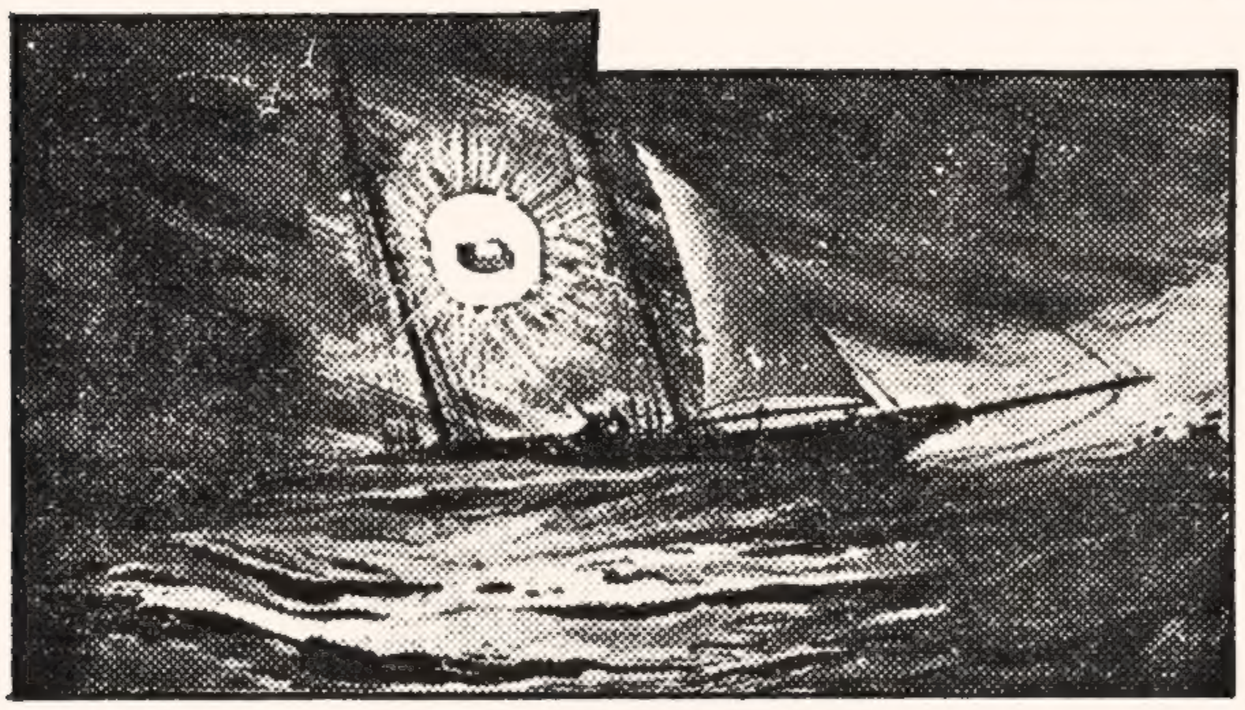
IF I FAILED...WE WERE ALL DEAD MEN

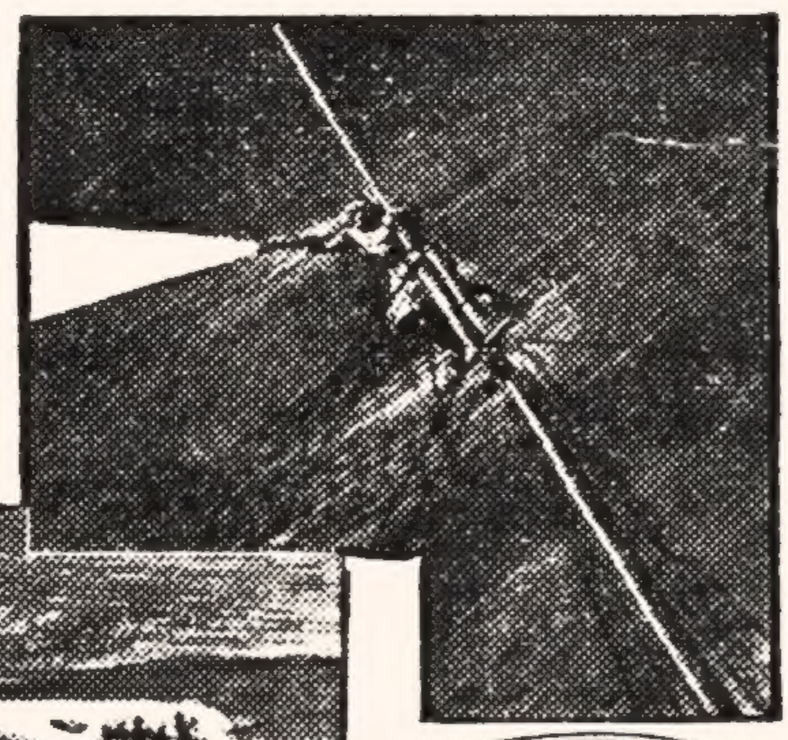
LASHED TO SHROUDS OF SINKING, BURNING SCHOONER, SAILORS SEE HOPE OF RESCUE FADE

❶ "The dream of my life, for which I had saved since I first went to sea at twelve, had come true!" writes Capt. Hans Milton of 610 West 111th St., New York City. "I was making my first voyage as master and owner of my own vessel, the two-masted topsail schooner 'Pioneer,' when the hurricane of last September caught us 400 miles off Nantucket.

❷ "We were pumping to keep afloat when we passed into the windless vortex of the storm where the waves were leaping and jumping crazily and where they crashed in our companion ways and filled the ship beyond hope of saving her. The five of us and the cat scrambled aloft for our lives. Our deck-load of lumber kept us afloat and without fresh water and with almost no food we lived, lashed to the rigging, for three endless days and nights.



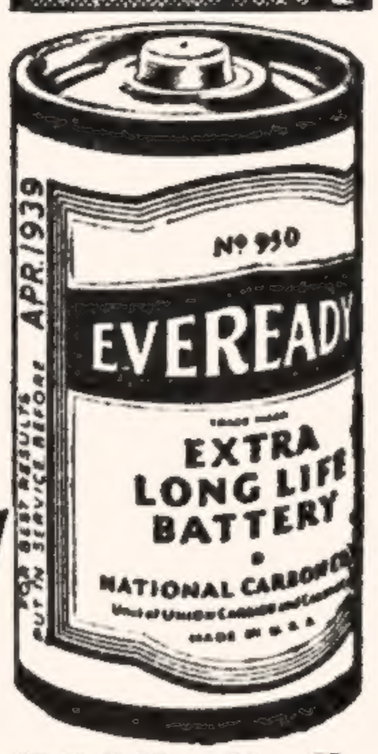
❸ "Once a steamer hove in sight—but failing to see our distress signals, went her way. At 3 a.m. on the fourth morning steamer lights showed momentarily over the wild sea. We rigged a huge ball of sails and blankets, soaked it with gasoline, touched it off and hoisted it aloft.



❹ "But the steamer did not change her course. She thought we were fishing. The wind blew burning fragments back on the ship setting her afire in various places. I could see the stern light of the steamer going away from us. *If I couldn't stop her, we were all dead men!* I climbed to the fore-top and in desperation pulled my flashlight from my back pocket and in Morse code signalled 'Sinking... S O S... Help!'

❺ "Slowly, I saw the ship turn! In her last hour afloat, all of us and the cat were saved from the sinking, burning 'Pioneer' by those fine seamen of the United States Liner 'American Banker' and by the power of two tiny 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries that stood by us in the blackest hour of our lives!"

(*Signed*) Captain Hans Milton



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THE ROUNDUP

BEGINNING with the next issue, we inaugurate a policy which we believe to be in accordance with the wishes of the majority of our readers and in line with the reputation which this magazine has enjoyed for so many years. It has always been our aim to give you the best of the West in fiction as well as other Western features. And now, as an added attraction, Western Story will include *book-length* novels!

The first of these long novels will be by Walt Coburn, and this latest of his many gripping yarns of the old West is, by far, his greatest. We're sure you'll agree with us when you have read RANGE ORPHAN. They might come bigger, but the whole Muleshoe outfit was willing to bet they didn't come any gamer than that tow-headed pint-sized button called Skeeter Roberts. The story of Skeeter and his battle to find his place on the range is a real-life drama such as only Walt Coburn can write. There's human interest aplenty and swift-paced action that will keep you breathless with suspense. There's humor that will make you roar with laughter and poignant situations that tug at the heartstrings. And through it all moves as grand a little hombre as was ever hoorawed by a salty bunch of rannies, a button you'll be mighty pleased to meet up with—Skeeter Roberts!

As we go to press, we're not only wading through the usual deluge of manuscripts which comes to us each year at this time, but the holiday mail as well. However, we couldn't resist taking time out to read a book which came to our desk the other morning—George Cory Franklin's HEARTBEATS FROM WILD LIFE (Suttonhouse, Publishers, Los Angeles). Mr. Franklin, who is the author of the well-loved "Chief" stories which appear in Western Story, has written an intriguing little volume of animal yarns which hold all the magic of the forest and its citizenry of wild creatures. For readers who enjoy wholesome, exciting stories of wild life we heartily recommend "The Bark Eaters," and we await with impatience the other volumes in this series.

Coming in next week's big issue—

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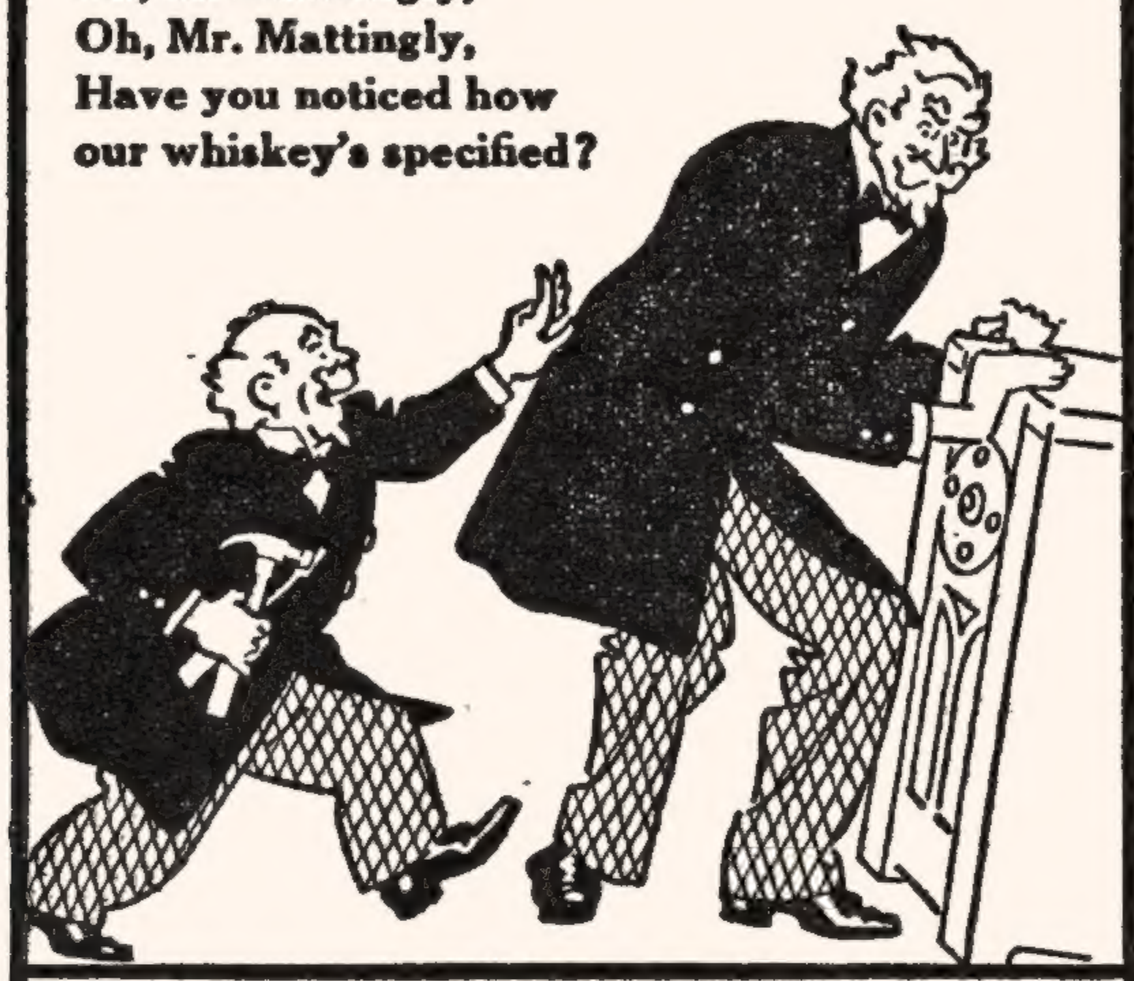

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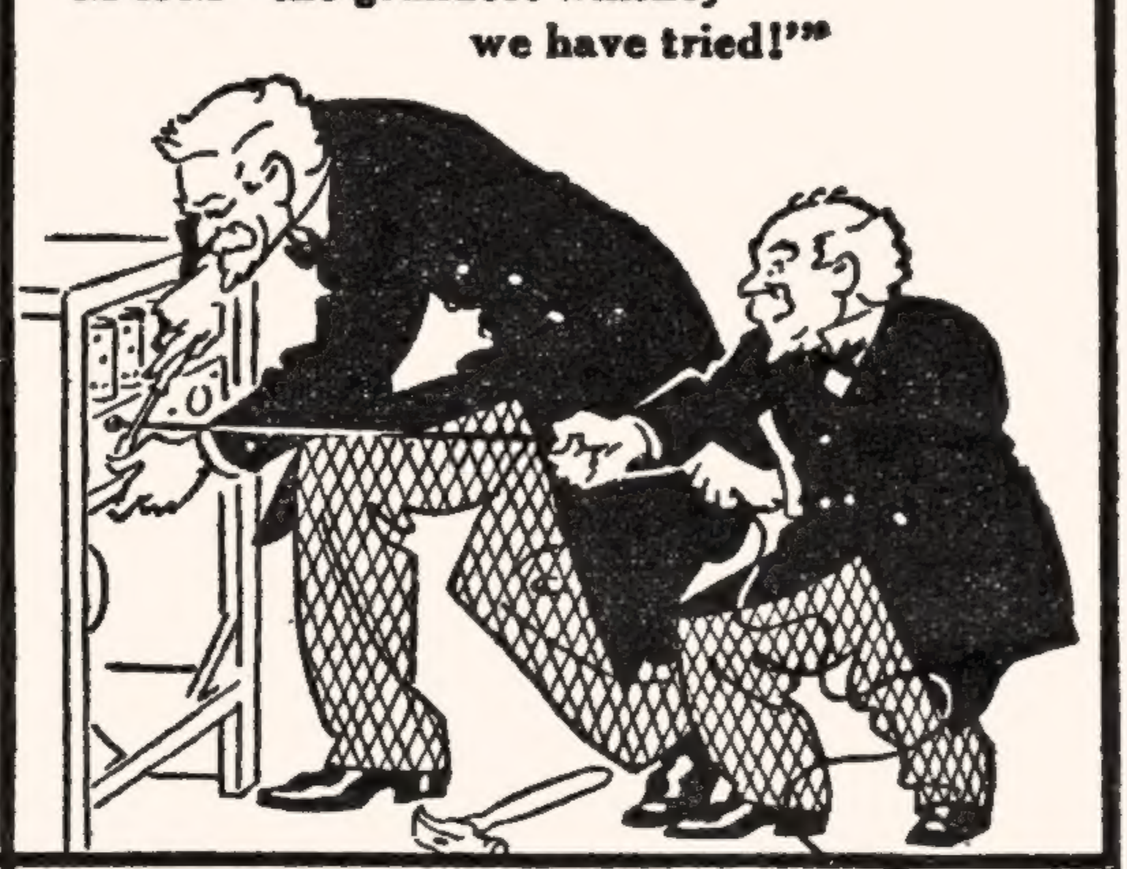

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ACES COME HIGH

Part One

by JACKSON GREGORY

CHAPTER I

A WAGER

Black Jack Devlin's place hunkered on a benchland just above the Three Fools' Pass in Fiddler's Gulch. From its wide puncheon porches under shady roofs you could look down into the shadowy depths of Secret Valley. You could look down, on the other hand, into the mysterious gloom of Lost Valley.

For the Pass was high up, commanding a hogback ridge which separated the two beautiful, dusky valleys.

There was a third valley, which its owner, Don Rodriguez de Valdez y Munoz, held to be the most lovely spot on earth, and so had named the Valley of Paradise. Only, being an old and sentimental Spanish gentleman, he called it Paraiso, which means Paradise.

Down there were deep gorges like Norwegian fiords, and tall sheer cliffs. There was a ridge high up on which stood the old Mountain House, with that spine of rock creating a high barrier between Secret Valley and Lost Valley.

Every day Black Jack Devlin, in a sort of ritual, marched round his porches, smoking a negligent cigarette, looking devil-may-care, yet staring spellbound into those valley lands. He loved them and he had had his home built up here above them so that he could hold one as near to his heart as the other.

He himself had the Mountain House. And he had his daughter. And he had his games, played for high stakes—with Black Jack Devlin winning at times when other men would have lost.

THIS green summer's afternoon, Black Jack Devlin came out on his porch that was as good as a lookout station. He wore high black boots that shone like mirrors, a spotless white silk shirt, a long-tailed coat, the biggest and broadest-brimmed hat in all the great West. He made a bow as his daughter Rose-alba came out on the porch from another door and approached him.

"I'm going to send you away, kid," he said abruptly. "I'm spoiling you up here. This is no place for you. You—"

"I've been counting the money," Rose-alba said, and she laughed. "That's what make my cheeks so pink and my eyes so bright. You know, Jack—"

"How old are you, anyhow?" he interrupted. He tried to sound gruff. "I seem to remember having read a poem somewhere when I was young and foolish. It said of some old fellow—or rather the old fellow, coming suddenly awake, said to himself, 'What ho, my lords! I have slept! My beard hath grown into my lap!' There was a picture, too. He looked all bothered about it, seeing himself like that. Now, while I've been thinking of other things it—"

"Only you never think!" Rose-alba scoffed. "You can fool other people. You can't fool me! And with the money we've taken in during the last two weeks—"

"I can send you away!" he finished. They strolled along the wide veranda, her arm in his, his eyes on the deep-cleft valleys, her eyes watchfully on him. "Down to some finishing school in Albuquerque or in Los Angeles or San Francisco or—"

"If our luck stays with us we can buy Secret Valley. They say the Haverils—"

"You're over seventeen, and I know it." He stopped and leaned against the porch rail, looking down into Secret Valley. "Of course, you are! Why, you were eighteen your last birthday! You're almost nineteen! What ho, my lords, I have slept and my daughter has grown into a young woman! And—"

"Jack Devlin!" cried Rose-alba, "will you listen to me?"

"When you were just a kid it was

all right," said Devlin. "Now it's different. I don't like the way these damned young mountain savages are looking at you. And I don't like the way you look back at some of them. And so—"

"There's Bob Roberts who owns I don't know how many mines and who can't play poker for sour apples," said Rose-alba teasingly. "He's a handsome devil, though. And there's scowly Tom Storm, down in Lost Valley, and he—"

"A young woman your age," said Jack Devlin, now the heavy parent, "has no business playing cards. She oughtn't even to know one card from another. And as for faro or roulette or—"

"Why you taught me to play draw when I was six years old," the girl laughed. "And who but you taught me the foxy way to bet and to skip bets on stud? And when I had luck running high, the way I did when I was ten, I even took you to the cleaner! Me, little Rosie Devlin, took old Black Jack to the cleaner at his own game. Why he was so hard-run that he had to palm a card once, and twice dealt off the bottom! Oh, you great big bluff!"

"Now look here, dammit," roared Black Jack.

"Shame!" she cried primly. "Such naughty words to a little girl only not-quite-twenty, who shouldn't know one card from another! A little girl that you think—*you!*—that you're going to shut up in a convent!"

"Rose, darling—"

"Don't try going soft on me, Jack Devlin!"

"Dammit!" he said, taking a white handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiping his foreehad.

"Hell take it!" laughed Rose-alba.

THEY were quite happy and carefree that green summer afternoon. They called it "green summer" because it was that precious, priceless season that came after the high mountain springtime ended and before the summer began. Yes, there were a few days, at blessed best a few weeks, when the season seemed not quite of the earth, but heavenly.

Of a sudden Black Jack Devlin thrust himself out of his softened mood and turned a pair of icy eyes down upon his daughter's gay ones.

"I'll play you one hand of draw to see whether you go or stay!" he said.

"I'll cut the cards with you, high card wins. That's quicker," Rose-alba offered.

"Come ahead," said her father. "Cut the cards and high card wins."

"On the level, Jack?" she demanded.

"On the level, kid."

They went through the nearest door into a big room, in its way a glorious old room. Years ago, when Jack Devlin had fancied himself a landed proprietor, this had been the room which was to be the warm and generous heart of his household. Low, wide windows looked out to east, south and west. Over the dark valleys, across ridge after ridge of purple mountains, and on beyond the mountain crests into infinity.

Now the place was fitted at one end with a bar. There were covered tables. You could have poker, roulette, faro, blackjack—you could have pretty much anything you named, provided you had the money to make it worth while. There were bright Indian rugs and three or four bearskins; a fireplace that was famous, being extravagant in size and in quartz-gold-flecked trimmings.

Black Jack took a fresh, sealed deck of cards from a cupboard. Rose-alba hovered about him, watching his every movement. He broke the seal.

She snatched the cards from him. "Let me look at those! If I catch you trying to cheat me—"

She sped to the nearest window, studying the backs of the cards. Then she put them down on a small table.

"Shuffle?" he asked politely.

"Let 'em run," said Rose-alba.

"The devil I will!" snorted Black Jack, and he shuffled them himself. "Cut?" he asked, politer than ever.

"Let 'em ride," she said.

"Fine. The lady first, for the high card."

She tapped the deck with her forefinger, then sliced the cards neatly. Her own card she kept face down.

Devlin didn't keep her waiting more than a second. He, too, sliced the deck. Together they flipped their cards over, each for the other to see.

Then they laughed together. For he had cut the ace of clubs. She had cut the ace of diamonds.

"Dammit!" said Jack Devlin.

"Hell take it!" laughed Rose-alba.

"Look here—" he began.

"You look here!" she taunted. And with a sudden gesture she produced as from the air—but he knew they came from under her arm—two more cards. She tossed them to the table, face down. "You look, old boy, if you've any notions you'd like to scatter away. And you think *you* can teach *me* anything about dealing a hand!"

He knew before he flipped the cards over. She had the two other aces.

"My three aces beat your one—and I don't go into anybody's convent yet a while!" she laughed.

There was a mirror on the wall, which took up all the space between two windows. It had cost Black Jack six hundred dollars. He had always known it wasn't worth it. But right now it was worth all of that and more. Because he could watch her reflection.

Today she was dressed all in black—black velvet. He knew that she was aping him and doing it impishly. He wondered where she had got the rig, or the stuff to make it of.

A hip-length black velvet jacket flared out jauntily over short black velvet skirt. High, black glistening boots. Her hair gone wild under a wide black hat. Silver girdle and buckles—

Dammit, the kid was pretty! Pretty? Lovely, and more than that. And full of the devil. Daring, full of life and pulsing to the tune of the sort of dreams that a girl like her would dream.

As she passed through the door she tossed him a kiss. Tossed it into the mirror to bounce back at him. She knew all the time that he would be watching her.

And, posing on the threshold, she called back to him in her gay, teasing voice, "Father! Oh, father! I see a dust cloud on the high trail! There are men coming! Shall I run and hide?"

CHAPTER II

LORD OF PARADISE VALLEY

AS the sun rolled down toward the western ridges, shadows marched first into Tom Storm's Lost Valley, and there, first of all, pin points of light showed where lamps were lighted in the ranchhouse and in the men's quarters. Next to be drawn into the darkness was the Valley of Paradise and far, bright lights began to

twinkle down there, too. In its turn, Secret Valley darkened and lighted its lamps and lanterns.

And after that, for a full quarter of an hour the Mountain House, high on the hogback above Three Fools' Pass basked in the sun, its windows brightest of all, with the live gleam of reflected sunlight.

There was scarcely an evening in the year, except when white winter was raging through the mountains and lowering its silver curtains from the stormy skies, that big Tom Storm, in Lost Valley, did not stand for a moment and look up at the flash of the Mountain House windows, the last brightness before the dark gathered in everything.

And from Paradise Valley, too, little Rita Valdez, when a tiny girl, used to come out of the Spanish patio and stand enraptured, looking up at sunset toward that enchanted castle.

"I want to go up there!" she used to say. "I want to wear a pretty dress and ride a white horse with silver and jewels on the saddle and bridle, and ride up there!"

"It is a bad place," they told her. "You must never go. They are bad, bad people. They steal and lie and rob and kill. Do not look that way, Chiquita."

But now Rita Valdez, like Black Jack Devlin's daughter in her late teens, was more than ever attracted to the place's intriguing wickedness. A man *had* been killed there, and there had been wild times, brawls and games with the skies for a limit. And always, pictured in her mind, the gambler Jack Devlin and his beautiful daughter named so strangely, Rose-alba—the White Rose.

"I am going up there," Rita said. "And I am not going to wait very long, either."

This evening Rita Valdez, dressed in white that floated about her like a cloud, and with a lacy mantilla over her dark hair, went straight to her seat in the patio and sat, fluffing her skirts, on the green bench. She smiled at old Romero, and he had enough happiness to last him twenty-four hours.

She sat musing, looking up at the glittering windows of the Mountain House. And it seemed to her that those windows had never gleamed with such golden lights before.

Presently Valdez came into the patio, her uncle Don Rodriguez de Valdez y Munoz. Small, dark and pompous, he was distinguished, handsome even, in his own way, as arrogant as a bantam rooster.

He did not see her and she did not speak. He called to the old servant.

"Romero, where is Juana?"

"One minute ago, señor, she was here," answered Romero, speaking as Don Rodriguez had done, in Spanish. "She has gone into the house, to her room, maybe."

"And my niece, Romero? She has not come this way yet tonight?"

Since the niece was not a dozen steps away, Romero waited respectfully for her to answer for herself. But she did not say a word; rather she drew a few inches farther back under the orange tree. So Romero remained silent.

"VENGA," commanded Valdez, and Romero came closer. "Listen, Romero, and do what I tell you. You will get on a horse now and ride toward Lost Valley. You will meet on the trail Señor Storm who is coming here. You will tell him that he is to say nothing about where he and I are riding tonight. You understand, Romero?"

"*Si, señor,*" nodded Romero.

"*Bueno.* Then hurry because he is coming soon." Don Rodriguez grew more human. "You are a good boy, Romero. Tonight I shall place a bet of twenty dollars for you. What it wins, you win."

Then, more like a bantam rooster than ever, he turned and marched with his short, important steps back into the house.

Rita sprang up and ran to the old servant.

"Romero! They are going up here then, my uncle and Tom Storm? To the Black Jack Devlin place? They are!"

"*Señorita!*"

"Romero!"

"Yes, *señorita?*"

"I am going, too! Yes, I am going!"

"*Jesus, Maria y Jose!*" gasped old Romero.

CHAPTER III

ENEMIES MEETING

UP at the Mountain House, Jock Hannigan, the bartender, began readying the main room. Saturday night again, and the wolves would be coming down from the higher-up country to howl.

They would come in from the North Star Mine, with young Bob Roberts leading the pack. They would come streaming down from the Lady Luck Mine and the Golden Girl and the Big Bazoom. The house would be filled with them. And they would be heavy with money, good honest gold coins.

So Hannigan removed the covers from the tables, dusted off the bar, put on his spectacles and sleeve-protectors, curled up his old-fashioned mustaches that were like a ram's horns, patted his hair that was shiny with oil and rippled back from a high forehead, and as much as said by the way he looked, "All right. Let 'em come. I can stand it if they can."

Consumptive Jimmy Weaver, a cigarette dangling loosely from his lips, came in and sat at the piano. He looked half dead and the other half asleep, and his hands were as languid as fading lilies. But from the contact of his fingertips with the keys there was born music that haunted those who heard it.

Doc—nobody had ever called him anything but that—came in. Slight and fair, young and innocent-looking, but with a pair of alert brown eyes, he was as clever a man at dealing roulette or faro as ever crossed the Rockies. He went to the piano and stood listening to Jimmy Weaver play.

Jimmy coughed, stuck the butt of his cigarette against the side of his instrument, and sang softly, "Where is My Wandering Boy Tonight?" because the devil was in him and he took a perverse pleasure in making Hannigan's and Doc's eyes blur with sentimental tears.

Bob Roberts, still in his early thirties, though he owned and operated the North Star, was the first man in that night. Eager and electric, he swung down out of his saddle from a sweat-drenched horse, slid a coin into the palm of the stable boy, and came striding along—to see Black Jack Devlin's daughter. Only of late, fighting with himself and in the end surrendering, he had acknowledged the one shining fact in all his worlds: he loved her.

He loved her and he wanted her, and he meant, all of a sudden, to win her!

He went straight to the bar and had his drink set forth by Hannigan. But he stood twirling his glass, looking around him, waiting. The men from the North Star who had trooped in behind him stood up to

the bar alongside. They, too, glanced around, perhaps to see if anything was doing at any of the tables. Or like him, they might have been watching for the appearance of Rose-alba.

Doc removed himself from the piano and took his place at the head of the roulette table. He set the little ivory ball whirring in its dizzy circle. When it dropped, clicking, into its appointed slot he regarded it with a queer, pained expression as though it had betrayed him. Then he set it whirring again. Meantime, he stacked and restacked the chips, their dry clickings a temptation. Any man with roulette in his blood would fidget and strain and would be soon drawn to the table.

THEN Bob Roberts, who had never played roulette in his life, having no fondness for what he deemed a fool's game of sheer luck, declared, "Dammit, Doc, I'm going to take a whirl at your game tonight. Here's a twenty on the side that I take you for a ride."

"Hello, Bob," Doc said. "Come along, boys, place your bets. The little ivory ball is rolling and it's as round as a marble and as square as a die, and you've got to lay them down before the pills finds its nesting place. There's red and black, odds and evens, columns and numbers. Twenty-seven it is, and Mr. Roberts wants seventy dollars. And here they are. Now, gents, the ball is rolling again—"

Bob Roberts swept in his winnings. He grinned at Doc. "You know damn well, Doc, I never play this game," he said. "Tonight I just had a hunch. I wanted to make sure of what I knew already, that my luck is running high. I'm out."

He wore that grin of his, which made him look like an urchin, all the time he was talking. With the frankly revealed flash of strong white teeth, with little laughing lines crinkling about his eyes, he was like a kid who was having the time of his life.

Doc took them as they came. He, too, smiled. "Well, Mr. Roberts, if you want to make sure your luck is riding high, better try it the second time," he advised. "The little ball rolls, gentlemen, and fortune smiles or does she giggle? Make the right guess and sleep on velvet. Guess wrong and go home broke. How about it, Mr. Roberts? Still think your luck is going to stick with you tonight?"

Bob Roberts suddenly slid a hand down into his pocket and brought up all he had. What with the seventy dollars which the table had just donated, he had about two hundred and fifty dollars. While the small ivory sphere was running races with itself around the rim of the bowl, he shoved his pile onto the black.

"Thanks, Doc," he said. "I really do want to be sure tonight."

He won. He laughed, scooped in his winnings, thrust them into his pocket, and went looking for Rose-alba.

Little by little as the visitors warmed to the evening, they gripped hands, drank together, swapped news. Thus, without aid of telephone or telegraph wires, or Uncle Sam's mails, were communities a hundred miles apart brought in touch with one another. Just outside of Red Dirt there had been a disaster. A mine had caved in. Down in Liberty the bank had been held up, the cashier killed. Any man having an item of news given him did his best in return.

In this way word came up from Secret Valley of an utterly unex-

pected arrival. Young Ross Haveril had just turned up after tramping and bumming his way for years in the dirty, dark corners of the world. That was news. It also meant trouble.

Rose-alba, eavesdropping just before she staged her entrance, heard

"Let me go!" Rita cried. "If I'm found here they will kill us both!"

it. She wondered even then, preening herself before a mirror, what the wild young Ross Haveril was going to be like. She didn't doubt that she would see him soon. Didn't all men come to the Mountain House?

Bob Roberts, restless, strolled out to the veranda and walked its whole length. "My luck is running high," he thought, "and I'm going to play it all the way, tonight."

There was no moon, so despite the clear skies and the stars, it was dark on the porch. From time to time Bob saw men come up one or another of the three flights of steps. Some of them he knew from their

voices or from glimpses he got as they crossed the pathways of light streaming out from a door or one of the windows.

Then he heard Tom Storm's voice, a deep, resonant voice, and he saw Storm, who looked like a young Saxon giant. Storm was in high good humor, and there was a small man with him. Bob Roberts made out who he was—the dandified little rooster from Paradise Valley, Señor Rodriguez de Valdez y Munoz.

As Tom Storm brushed by Bob Roberts, he came to a stop. The two regarded each other steadily and for an electric moment the air was charged with their hatred.

Then Storm laughed. "So you're back again, are you, Roberts?" he said. "Don't you see what a damned fool you're making of yourself?"

Roberts didn't answer, though he stiffened from head to foot. Storm went on into the house, Valdez at his side.

"Funny somebody hasn't killed Tom Storm long ago," thought Bob Roberts. His pulses were pounding and he remained tense. But he held himself in check, although it was not easy.

Through the windows he could see into the gaming room. Rose-alba had not yet made her appearance. He walked restlessly up and down, lighting a cigarette, pinching it out, lighting another.

PRESENTLY two figures stood quite close to him. They had come quietly up the west steps and had not seen him. One was a slight-bodied young Mexican. The other was old Romero of Paradise Valley. The two, like himself, were looking in at a window. Then he heard the younger one gasp, "Oh, Romero! Look! There she is!"

And now he, too, saw Rose-alba come into the gambling room, and his eyes and all his attention, like his heart, were for her alone.

Rose-alba Devlin made one of her dramatic entrances. She stilled his pulse, then set it bounding again. She was dressed in a gown of clinging green velvet, and she looked like some sylvan creature that had just flashed in from a place of green forests and limpid pools. She was so lovely that the sight of her hurt him. And in an instant men started toward her—and big Tom Storm was at their fore, pushing others out of his way.

And then, before Bob Roberts had stirred out of his tracks, a man entered the room and Bob stared, at first incredulous, then with another quickening of his pulses.

The newcomer was young, a big man, as big as Tom Storm, and seemingly every whit as forceful. But where Storm was fair and blue-eyed, this man was dark, almost swarthy. He had shaggy hair that needed cutting and was as black as coal and jet black eyes that flashed like black diamonds. He was wearing a battered black hat, crumpled clothes and big down-at-the-heel boots. Apparently he hadn't shaved in days, and his was the sort of bristly black beard that should be reaped every twelve hours. And he came into the room as though a storm wind was behind him.

"Lord love us!" Bob Roberts muttered. "Old Ross come home again! Ross Haveril of all men!"

Then he hurried into the house.

It was at that moment that the last of the Sundown Haverils of Secret Valley, strong and violent men, and Ross the strongest and most tempestuous of them all, saw Black Jack Devlin's daughter. He

saw her for the first time in that clinging, figure-revealing green velvet gown.

He stopped and stared. His disreputable old hat was still on his head, thrust far back on his thick tangle of black hair. And lights danced in his eyes.

And Rose-alba saw him! There was no missing a man like him, storming in as he did, then looking at her like that.

Ross Haveril started to speak. His voice was like that of some jovial young bull. "Girl!" he said, and started toward her.

Tom Storm, not far from her, made a quick, involuntary movement, and Haveril stopped dead in his tracks. Again he stared with all his might. Now at Storm. On the instant he forgot the girl.

"Storm!" he shouted. "Tom Storm! Why, you dirty, low-lived son of a skunk! You—" Then, his big fists balled like war clubs, he bore down on Tom Storm like the downpour of an avalanche. And Storm leaped forward to the meeting, a bright, hard eagerness in his eyes. So it was like one avalanche meeting another.

The blows struck could be heard throughout the big room. Both men had it in them to strike like kicking mules. Both men, it became obvious, could stand up under mule-kicks.

THE battle might have lasted an hour, and the big room with its embellishments might have been a wreck. But Black Jack took pride in the fact that he was what folks called a "gentlemanly" gambler. He cared not the snap of a finger and thumb how many of his guests killed each other or how they did it, but he did insist that they do it somewhere else, and not mess up his place.

Also he had seen the way Ross Haveril looked at Rose-alba, and had caught the tone of his voice when he sang out, "Girl!"

So now he stepped quietly to the bar. Without a word Jock Hannigan handed his employer an innocent-looking instrument encased in soft black leather. Inside that satiny leather covering was a load of buckshot.

Black Jack Devlin stepped behind Ross Haveril. He struck one blow, coolly and efficiently, and Haveril went to the floor like a stricken giant.

"Cart him outside," said Devlin. "Douse him with water, put him on his horse and send him home. And tell him he's not to come back here!"

Bob Roberts elbowed his way forward. "Damn you, Devlin!" he cried. "That was a dirty trick. Ross Haveril is a friend of mine and a white man. If he wanted to tie into Tom Storm it was for a good reason."

"Take it easy, Bob," said Black Jack." His voice was quiet, though his eyes grew hot. "This is my place and I run it my way. If he's a friend of yours, get him away from here and don't bring him back."

Bob Roberts stood glowering. Then he beckoned a couple of men from the North Star, and they bore the limp body of the unconscious Haveril to the porch. A few men followed to see if he were dead. Among them pressed the slim figure of the Mexican youth who seemed unwilling to miss anything of this tremendous drama.

When Roberts was satisfied that Haveril was not too seriously hurt, he went back into the gaming room. He stalked straight up to Tom Storm.

"Storm," he said, "I've always thought you all the things Ross Haveril called you, but I wasn't sure. Now I'm sure, because Ross said it. You're all the things he called you!"

There was blood on Tom Storm's face, dribbling down from his battered lips, and there was a murdersome rage seething within him. He was in the mood to take on Roberts as Ross Haveril's substitute and make short work of him, too.

So almost as quickly as the first fight had ended a second began. Jack Devlin looked disgusted. Things weren't going at all right tonight; they weren't going as they should in a gentleman-gambler's place.

Hannigan himself now stepped out unobtrusively from behind the bar. An instrument that was a perfect twin to the one he had handed Devlin was in his right hand.

Rose-alba tried to stop him, but she was too late. Bob Roberts and Big Tom Storm met just as Storm and Ross Haveril had met. They were in the mood to kill.

Hannigan, a soft-hearted man, sighed. Then he swung his blackjack up and brought it down easily. It cracked against Tom Storm's skull, and Storm, like Ross Haverill, went sweetly to sleep.

Bob Roberts, unscathed, looked at Black Jack Devlin as though he'd like to rend him limb from limb. The gambler returned his look, then shrugged, smiled and touched up his needle-pointed mustaches. Roberts, angry color in his face, swung about and went outside to take care of Haveril. But at the door he paused and looked back at Hannigan, as if to say, "I'm kind of rattled but thanks, hombre, for crashing down on Storm instead of on me."

CHAPTER IV

HAVERIL RETURNS

SECRET VALLEY in the soft starlight was a place of ineffable beauty. But then, whether moonlit or sun-drenched, it was always lovely. At its northern end waterfalls spilled down over the cliffs in white froth like lace. And there were deep dark pools where quick trout lived, fern-ringed greenish bowls of mountain water rimmed with big boulders and shaded by laurels and aspens and buckeyes. The little river, called Sundown Creek, rippled crookedly down the valley floor, and there was just enough timber left standing to make the whole valley a vast park.

But of all this, tonight Ross Haveril saw little or nothing. He had returned to his birthplace only today. He had wandered about for a few hours, with rage getting a stranglehold on him, choking him until the tears almost came. Then he had gone up to Black Jack Devlin's place.

He had gone up there to do a bit of forgetting. It hurt, coming back after a dozen or more years, to see what had happened to Secret Valley. The cliffs and waterfalls and creek and trees had lost none of their loveliness—but the fences were down, posts were rotting, and the old Haveril house was a battered shell.

So he went to the Mountain House to wash the taste out of his mouth with a few drinks and out of his brain with a game. And then to come upon Tom Storm! Tom Storm, of all men!

But here he was, back again at Secret Valley. He was in the house. Someone had carted him home, had put him down on the old green sofa in the parlor, or what had once been the parlor.

He reared up on an elbow, then sank back with a groan. Holy cow, what a thunderbolt someone had swung to do this to him! He shook his shaggy head, got up on his elbow again, and looked into the concerned eyes of an old, old friend.

"Why, Bob! Bob Roberts!" he roared.

"Hello, Ross," said Bob Roberts.

Ross Haveril got his legs off the sofa, his big feet down on the floor. With an effort he stood up. He swayed slightly.

"I'm home," he said. "Home again. And what a hell of a home! Just now I thought I was up at Black Jack Devlin's place and that I ran into that cross between a sewer rat and a boa constrictor that folks call Tom Storm. And now, here I am again." He ran a grimy hand through his rough shock of hair. "What in hell did Storm do to me, anyhow, Bob?"

"I didn't know you ever knew Storm," said Roberts.

Ross Haveril did not answer but went across the room and pawed into a dilapidated Gladstone bag. He dragged out a quart bottle of southern rum and came back to offer it to Bob. Roberts drank for old times' sake, but drank sparingly. Ross Haveril gulped it down as though it were water and he thirsty.

Then he pitched the bottle into a corner and reached out both big hairy arms to clamp them down like grappling hooks on Roberts' shoulders.

"Why, damn you, Bob," he cried. "Nothing has made me as glad in a dozen years as to see you! But you say, do I know Tom Storm?" All the laughter went out of him.

"I guess you know him all right," admitted Roberts.

I RAN into him down in Guatemala. That was a good ten years ago. We teamed up. I took a liking to the devil. We went down into Nicaragua together, both young, both dead broke, both looking for fun, and whatever it is that young fellers think they'll find at the foot of the rainbow.

"And we kept on going. We stuck together for two years. In South America it was that we made our killing, high up in the Andes where the silver mines were breaking out like a rash. We horned in where Americans weren't particularly wanted and fought it through together. We had one beautiful hell of a time, Bob. And we came out on top, with a hundred thousand in cash and a string of mining concessions.

"And then Tom Storm, damn his hide, rapped me over the head with a crowbar one night, grabbed the hundred thousand and— Well, I never knew where he went, never heard of him or saw hide or hair of him until tonight. I guess, Bob, you can understand how glad I was to catch up with him!"

"He's like that," said Roberts. "I never caught him redhanded, but that's the sort he is."

"You haven't told me yet how in blue blazes he put me out up there at the Mountain House?"

Bob Roberts hesitated. Also, being young, a hot flush came up into his tanned cheeks. He didn't like to say anything against Rose-alba's father. But facts were facts, and Ross Haveril was his friend.

"It wasn't Storm who hit you," he said. "It was Black Jack Devlin. After all, I don't know as you could blame him. He doesn't want rough-and-tumble murder fights up at his place. He crowned you with a blackjack."

"Why, damn him!" roared Ross Haveril. "In another shake I'd have had Storm down on his back, pounding the merry hell out of him —pounding a hundred thousand dollars out of him if he's still got it— and now Devlin puts me away and Storm goes off laughing!"

"Here's the rest of it," said Roberts, and told how he had tied into Storm, and would have probably been beaten to a pulp, when Hannigan, emulating his employer, had stepped up and rapped Tom Storm over the head, bringing him down cold.

Ross Haveril shouted with laughter. "That's all right, then," he declared approvingly. "Now that I've come up with Tom Storm he can't get so far away that I don't dig him out again. Let's forget him. We'll have another drink to wash the taste of him out of our memories—"

He looked about for his bottle, stared ruefully at the shattered fragments and laughed again.

"That girl!" he said. "She'd knock your eye out! Who is she, Bob, and will I find her up at the Mountain House at any time?"

For the second time Bob Roberts hesitated. But again, since facts were facts, he spoke straight to the point.

"She's Rose Devlin, Black Jack's daughter. He'd kill a man for looking at her in the wrong way. And— Damit, Ross, you leave her alone!"

Ross Haveril's brows shot up as he strove to read whatever lay in his friend's heart and soul.

"So it's like that, is it, Bob?" he said more quietly.

"Yes. It's that way."

"And what about Tom Storm? Does he count in?"

Bob's jaw hardened. "He wants her, Storm does. He wants everything. Some day—but look here, Ross," he pleaded. "You've just seen her for the first time tonight. Why, man, you haven't even spoken a word to her! She doesn't mean anything to you—"

"How do you know that?" Haveril interrupted.

"She can't! Not when you've just got a sight of her, nothing more! Keep off, Ross!"

Ross Haveril stood staring at him another moment, then laughed again.

"Let's step outside on the porch," he said. "Let's get out into the fresh air a minute. My head's splitting. And it breaks a man's heart to be in this damned dead and moldy house! The place seems deserted, but I saw a couple of horses and a cow or two. And somebody must have plowed the old orchard last spring."

"It's Luke," Roberts told him. "Old Luke Oliver. He's stayed on, all these years."

"Say, that's fine! Good old Luke Oliver! When I was a kid— But where is he now? I haven't seen hide nor hair of him, and I blew in this afternoon."

"I wouldn't know," said Bob. "Looks like he's sort of losing heart. Guess Luke, like the rest of us, dodges out from under when things get to bearing down too hard."

ROSS HAVERIL stooped toward him. In the dim starlight he strove to read the expression on Bob's face.

"Bearing down hard on Luke?" he demanded. "Why?"

"He's had hard luck, Ross. He's about to lose the place. It's mortgaged up to the hilt."

"Mortgage? What mortgage? Luke's losing the place— What place?"

"Why, this one. Secret Valley. What did you suppose?"

Again Ross Haveril ran his big fingers through his dense shock of hair. "Luke's got Secret Valley mortgaged?" he said, in an oddly quiet voice. "How come, Bob? Who in hell does the valley belong to, anyhow?"

"Why, to Luke Oliver, of course. You knew that, didn't you, Ross? Do you mean to tell me—"

"Somehow I got the notion tangled up inside my head that Secret Valley belonged to me," said Ross Haveril, his voice dangerously quiet.

For a little while neither man said anything. There was little need of words unless a man wanted details and explanations which lay behind the stark facts themselves. Already Ross Haveril understood that the home to which he had just returned, the home which he believed his—with Luke Oliver a faithful retainer and caretaker—belonged not to him at all, but to Luke himself.

In their silence they looked not at each other but out through the night, across the ripping fields and meadows of the upper end of Secret Valley.

Then there came a slow, heavy tread in the bare, hard-packed yard. They made out the man's figure. He was tall. His face was hidden under his broad-brimmed hat. His shoulders stooped.

"It's Luke Oliver," said Bob. "He saw our light. Guess he's come down from the old bunkhouse—he still lives there—to see what the hell—"

Luke came on slowly, stopped at the top step, and cleared his throat. "Hello, Bob," he said, "that's you, ain't it?" He was still a moment, and then in the same soft-toned voice, he said, "Hello, Ross. That's you, ain't it?"

Slowly he lifted a sinewy hand, offering it to young Haveril. "Well, hello, Ross," he said again. Then, when Ross' hand at last went out to engulf his, Luke said, "Looks to me like rain. There's a thunder storm boiling up tomorrow, I'd bet a man. Say, Ross, you been away quite a spell now, ain't you? How's everything?"

"Fine," said Ross Haveril. "Fine, Luke. How're things with you?"

"Rotten," answered Luke in that still, soft voice. "Let's go inside and squat. Things is sort of quiet here now, Ross, but we can have a game of checkers. Or if Bob here feels like it, we'll make it three handed stud."

"Bob tells me this place is yours now, Luke—Secret Valley," Ross said, his heavy voice sounding controlled, under pressure.

"Sure," admitted Luke. "It's been mine for ten years. Didn't you know? Or didn't you care?"

"How come?" asked Ross tightly. "Me, I'd sort of got the crooked notion in my head that this was the Haveril place."

"Oh, my eye and Pete's red sow!" said Luke, and his voice almost warmed up.

Perhaps he was going on to say something more, man of few words though he was, but just then there came to their ears the soft beat of hoofs crossing the meadow, coming from Sundown Creek.

"There ain't been so damn many folks out this way in years," said Luke Oliver. "Company, Ross."

"Who?" Ross said sourly. "I don't want to see anybody. Just you, Luke, to get this straight. Just Bob Roberts for old times' sake. Who is it, Luke?"

Luke had not the faintest idea and didn't venture a guess until the rider came so close that he could recognize the horse.

"It's somebody from Paradise

Valley, from the Valdez ranch," he said, evidently mystified. "First time any Valdez rider ever came over here. Hell, let's go inside and play checkers. Remember, Ross? That night you flew off the handle and went places and never came back till now—must have been ten-twelve-fourteen years ago—you and me was playing checkers. I had two kings against your one. You had a chance and—"

He was already leading the way into the house. Ross fell into step, and Bob Roberts followed them, with a look over his shoulder at the oncoming rider. He wondered how Luke could make out what horse it was at that distance and in that light.

"What sort of a damn bozo have you turned out to be, anyhow, Luke?" demanded young Haveril. "A crook?"

"Me, I was wondering about you, too, Ross," said Luke softly.

"Your visitor is Valdez himself," Bob Roberts announced. "I saw him tonight at the Mountain House. Valdez from Paradise Valley. He was with Tom Storm. They're friends, Ross."

Ross Haveril swung about toward the door.

"If this gent is a friend of Tom Storm's," he said, "you just watch me boot him out of Secret Valley." His voice hardened. A sort of jeer came into it as he added, "Even if Luke has stolen the valley here, you just watch me boot any friend of Tom Storm's."

"Ross," said Luke Oliver, and the two could scarcely hear his low-spoken words, "you're a damn jackass and ever was, that hasn't got sense enough to dig inside a baked potato. I wonder, times, how you can get your boots on without somebody helping you. I wonder how you can feed yourself. Now, Ross, you keep still just like mice do, or I'll bat your biscuit off."

Luke, so softly spoken, was the one at the door to greet Señor Valdez.

CHAPTER V

A BRIBE

LEAVING his horse with dragging reins, Don Rodriguez de Valdez y Munoz came up the steps. Invited by Luke Oliver to come in, he stepped into a room shadowily lighted by two lamps. His small, shrewd eyes took stock of the three men, Bob Roberts and Luke Oliver whom he knew, Ross Haveril whom he wanted to know.

"Señor," he said, and bowed toward Ross, "I have not the honor of knowing you, yet I came to speak a word or two with you. May I do so?"

"You're Valdez from Paradise Valley," said Ross Haveril. "And you want to talk with me? Well, why not?"

Don Rodriguez stood a moment, uncertain. But there was an eloquence about the man even when his lips, as now, were tightly compressed. His whole small body, shoulders, hands, and eyes, spoke for him. He looked from Ross Haveril to the others, and back again at Ross. It was quite as though he had said:

"But, my dear sir, it is with you that I wished to speak. The matter is one of privacy. Cannot we be alone?"

Haveril grunted, and Bob Roberts and Luke Oliver moved toward the door.

Valdez made them a gentle bow that said clearly, "Thank you, Mr. Oliver. And thank you, too, Mr. Roberts."

Meantime two other riders had

come down from the Mountain House into Secret Valley. They rode quietly, stopping in the dark under a big oak a hundred yards from the Haveril house. They had seen Valdez go in. They saw the lantern bobbing away as Luke Oliver carried it.

"For the love of God, señorita!" pleaded old Romero.

Rita Valdez swung down from her saddle lightly.

"I am going to peek, I am going to listen. I am going to find out a lot of things, Romero!" she said. "You wait here with the horses!"

And inside the house Ross Haveril looked at his visitor. "Well, Valdez, what's on your mind?" he growled. "I don't know you, and I don't know that I care to. So make it snappy."

Valdez smiled. "You are Señor Haveril, no? One time you owned—or at least your people, your father—owned Secret Valley. Now you have lost it. You have come back here—and look at what you have come back to! A place of ruins!"

"Why, damn you—" Ross began.

"And," continued Valdez, as his eyes trailed over the ragged figure of his host, "you come back home with no more money in your pockets than you had when you ran away, a dozen years ago. I think, my friend, that to you a hundred dollars would look as big as the moon in August!"

"You damned little rabbit!" roared Haveril and took a step forward.

But Valdez, without stepping backward, merely kept on smiling.

"I'll not take up your time, señor. You are without money, no? As for me, I have money in great plenty. Now we come to the point: I saw how you greeted that Tom Storm of Lost Valley, and I heard what you said to him! *Bueno!* If you need money, come to me. I am to be found at Paradise Valley. And you will just tell me all that you know about Señor Storm, and why you called him the things which you did call him, and what it is that he has done that made you feel it would be—how shall I say it?—a good thing if you killed him."

"Oho!" said Ross Haveril. And then he gave the little don a blow on the shoulder that made him sag at the knees.

Ross Haveril started to laugh, so heartily it seemed, that he would never stop. Little Rita Valdez, on the porch, peering in as she had done at the Mountain House, stared, fascinated. Ross Haveril frightened her, disturbed her strangely.

"Let's have it all," Haveril ordered. "Just what's eating you?"

"Eating me?" For a moment the little hidalgo rooster was puzzled. Then he understood. "Señor," he said with great dignity, "there is no thing at all in the world that eats me. But there are things which make me hungry, like a good Spanish sherry before supper, to know other things. And I pay for my Spanish sherry. And you would like some money. You could buy a new hat, new boots, new clothes. And you could go somewhere where you could buy fine wines and have a pretty girl for company."

Ross Haveril stopped laughing, but there was a bright gleam of interest in his eyes.

"You told me to listen, Señor Don Diablo de Valdez," he said. "*Bueno.* I listen. Shoot the works."

VALDEZ thrust a hand into his pocket and brought out several golden twenties. He fingered the coins. Five of them he held out in his palm.

"Here are one hundred dollars. I am glad to have you accept them.

And when you have done so, all I ask is that you tell me everything you know about that Tom Storm."

Ross Haveril looked at the money, looked into the little man's eyes, looked again at the money, and then at his own clothes. He regarded his sloppy, lopsided boots, he considered his shabby coat and trousers, his battered hat. Then he looked at the little don with great gravity.

"You look to me, Señor Don Diablo, like something that had just crawled up out of hell. You are trying to tempt me, trying to buy my soul!" Then he started laughing again, put out his hand and scooped the coins into his palm.

"A hundred dollars, Valdez. That's a lot of money—sometimes. Take me. I've known the time when I wouldn't cross the road for a drop in the bucket like that. Then again, I've known the times when I've thought I'd run down to hell for half of it! It's now you're up and now you're down—and that's life, eh, amigo? *La vida es un sueno,* no? And sometimes, like tonight, we dream big dreams!"

"You are very right, Mr. Haveril. So . . . tell me!"

"*Bueno,*" said Ross Haveril. "You have paid me and so I'll earn some of my money. A whole hundred dollars! Man alive, that's real money when you're down and out!"

"Yes. Sure for sure, I know," Valdez said eagerly.

"All right," agreed Haveril. "I'll tell you a thing or two. I know Tom Storm. He's a damned thief. I was with him in South America. We were partners. We made some money. He whanged me over the head when I wasn't looking for it and ran out with the cash. And that's the story."

Valdez cogitated. "Yes," he said after a while. "And that was how long ago?"

"About six years," said Haveril.

"Ah! And now will you tell me, señor, about how many pesos this thief ran away with?"

"It amounted to a hundred thousand dollars in round numbers."

A queer smile, one that a stranger could make nothing of, came fleetingly to the thin lips under the Valdez mustache.

"So! And then our Señor Tom Storm came here. With so much money in his pocket. And he bought the Lost Valley. And he— But never mind." He stopped smiling and his eyes narrowed. "One more thing I will ask," said Valdez. "You were with this dog whose name is Storm for some years. You must know him well. Do you know of other evil deeds of his?"

Out on the porch, Rita Valdez, was wondering about Ross Haveril. She thought, "If somebody gave him a bath and shaved him and bought him some nice clothes and cut his hair and—and tamed him, he would be handsome." And she kept on thinking, "My uncle is a great liar, and that is a thing I have found out tonight. And I have found out other things—and I have seen that girl. And Mr. Roberts is c-r-azy about her—and so is Tom Storm that is trying to make love to me! And so is this pagan god, this Haveril man. And me—*Vamos a ver!* Let's keep some eyes open and let's see a lot of more things!"

Haveril took his time answering Valdez's question. "You want the deadwood on Storm, eh?" he said at last. "Let's see, that means that he has done something to you and you want to get back at him. You can't quite see the way. You need help. What's in the wind, Valdez?"

Valdez shrugged. "Am I paying you? Or are you paying me?"

ROSS HAVERIL jingled the gold coins, his hardened features widening in a broad smile as he looked at Valdez.

"Sure. You're right. Well, señor, I can't tell you any more of Tom Storm than I've already told you. I've a notion he may have murdered a few men in his time, taking life in his stride, but I can't be sure. I only know it would be like him. And now, have you got your hundred dollars' worth?"

Valdez spoke more directly to the point than he had done before.

"Haveril," he said, now addressing Ross as he would any of his servants, "I have received, as you say, my money's worth. But I shall speak with you again."

He turned toward the door, then hesitated, hung on his heel, and turned back.

Haveril grinned. "Get it out of your system, old boy," he said, offhandedly disrespectful of the Valdez y Munoz dignity. "What's still bothering you?"

"I saw you fight with Storm," said Valdez. "If you should fight with him again some time, if you should happen to—to maybe hit him so hard that you killed him—well, I would anyhow keep on being your friend. You understand me? *Bueno, y buenas noches.*"

At that he went out so suddenly that his little niece was almost caught spying on him. She scurried along the porch to its darkest corner.

Ross Haveril followed his guest as far as the door, stood there a moment looking after him, then still stood there, thinking.

He and Rita Valdez were not six feet apart. She was trembling so that she was consicous of her knees touching each other throbbingly. She wanted to jump and run! And she wanted to stay! And she was thinking, in a strange, troubled fashion, "I want to know this man! I want to talk to him, to have him talk to me. He is different—and my small little life has never had anything different in it."

Then Ross Haveril saw her shrinking back into the dark, making her tiny self tinier.

CHAPTER VI

THE SECOND GUEST

WHEN she saw that he had discovered her she tried to jump down over the railing. But he caught her and dragged her back. She clawed at his face like an angry kitten.

He whipped her hands behind her back, held her two wrists in one of his big hands and scooped her up into the crook of his arm.

"We'll carry you into the house to see what you look like by lamplight," he said.

She began to scream, calling to Romero, but already Haveril had carried her across the threshold and had kicked the door shut. As he set her down, he clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Well, I'll be damned," he cried, amazed to find himself holding a girl. "You keep still," he commanded her. "No more yelling. If you let out one more yip I'll get a great big butcher knife out of the kitchen and —and I'll cut your hair off! I'll make me a hair rope out of it. Most likely, too, I'll get some soot off the stove and blacken the end of your nose. And, young woman, there are even worse things that can happen to a beautiful young girl—or are there?"

Then she saw that he was laughing at her, and she was no longer afraid. But she was tremendously angry. She made her favorite gesture. She stamped her pretty little, high-arched foot in its attractive high black boot and began to chatter angrily. So again he scooped her up, into both arms, and Rita Valdez was kissed as she had never been kissed before—as she had never even dreamed a girl could be kissed.

"Now," he said, "will you be good?"

He stood back and looked at her. And then Ross Haveril gave a long whistle. "Why, you're lovelier than a forest fire!" he said admiringly.

She knew now that it wasn't going to do her any good to be high and mighty with him. So she clasped her hands and pressed them against her breast.

"Please!" she begged. "Oh, please! Just let me go. I have been crazy and now I am sorry and scared and—let me go!"

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

"*Virgin santissima!*" she gasped. "You must not ask! It must never be known! I would die of shame—and besides, they would kill me!"

"Oho!" said Ross Haveril, and started laughing again. She thought furiously that he would always be laughing or storming and fighting—or making terrible love! She rubbed the back of her hand across her mouth.

"You have been very, very rude to me," she said haughtily.

"I don't have to ask any more who you are," chuckled Haveril. "The way you talk, the way you act—and that little hop-o'-my-thumb Valdez was here just now. You're his daughter, I'll bet a man, and you came to snoop."

She lifted her chin at him. "You are c-razy. Because he has no daughter."

"Want to get kissed again?" Haveril asked soberly.

She flashed her eyes at him, striving to keep her hot color down.

"I would rather be dead! I would rather be chopped up in pieces."

"Well, I don't much blame you," said Haveril, and rubbed his bristly jaw. "But look here, you belong somehow to the Paradise Valley outfit. You're either Valdez's daughter or granddaughter or grandmother or second cousin, or something like that. You tell me, and I promise not to kiss you again tonight, and maybe I won't even chop you up in pieces."

"You let me go!" said Rita.

"Luke Oliver is going to make mince pies tomorrow," said Haveril. He sighed and looked unhappy.

"You great big fool!" said Rita scornfully. "What do you talk to me like that for?"

"I'll have to chop you up, after all," said a sorrowing Haveril. "We'll use you for mincemeat. And—"

"Very well! If I tell you, will you let me go? And will you be a gentleman, or anyhow as much a gentleman as you can and not tell anyone that I came here tonight? Never and never?"

"YOU remind me of a new crescent moon I saw not long ago out at sea," mused Haveril. "And you make me think of a white-and-pink orchid I stopped to look at down in South America. And you're a funny kid and I'm going to tell you a very great secret. Tonight I went to the Mountain House and I saw Black Jack Devlin's little devil—and I fell head over heels in love with her. All at first sight, mind you!"

"Ugh!" said Rita disdainfully.

"And now you drop down here

like a brand-new star from heaven. And all at first sight, mind you, here I am falling in love with you! What's happened to this part of the world since I went traveling?"

"So!" She was scornful. "It is like that! You see a girl and you fall terribly in love with her—and then you see the next girl and you break your heart some more. And when you were on the ocean there were baby moons, and when you were in South America there were orchids—and all the time there was some girl—"

"Why, you're jealous already!" shouted Ross Haveril, and forgetting his promise, he scooped her up and kissed her again.

"You big coward," cried Rita. "Shame on you. Now I am going and I hate you and I am never going to see you again. Never and never. And I am not going to tell you who I am or anything."

Ross stepped swiftly to the door and opened it for her.

"I broke my promise," he said, "so I'll let you go. But I'll find you again and very soon. And as you go, think of this: There were orchids and there were new moons—but I never fell in love until tonight!"

"Do you think I'll believe—"

"But it's true!" Ross Haveril said earnestly. "And I fell twice! With Black Jack's daughter and with the flower of Paradise Valley! And now you'd better run along and let me figure this out: How can I have both of you? Or will it be just one of you? And which one?"

He started to laugh again—and little Rita Valdez fled into the darkness that lay like a blanket over Secret Valley.

Does Ross Haveril's return mean trouble with Tom Storm? Will Black Jack Devlin's beautiful daughter come between Ross and Bob Roberts? What does Rita Valdez fear? The second installment of this gripping serial appears in next week's Western Story Magazine. Reserve your copy now!

THE FIRST TEXAN

SEEING as how Texas leads the world in cow production, it's interesting to note that the first white man to explore Texas was named Señor Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, or Mr. Cow's Head.

Señor Cow's Head reached Texas by accident, having been shipwrecked near Galveston Bay in 1528 with three companions, one of them a Negro slave, Estevan, who was to make a name for himself in Western history in later years. But it was Cabeza de Vaca who got out and saw Texas. He roamed with a band of hunting Indians up into the central plains, and he was the first white man to see the great American buffalo. Later he and his companion made their way south and southwest, and after eight years of hardship they reached the Spanish settlements in Culiacan, Mexico.

The name Cow's Head was an ancient and very honorable one in Spain. An ancestor of the first Texan was a spy or scout for one of the early Spanish kings who was trying to recapture a certain town that had long been in the hands of the Moors. This spy found a secret back trail over the mountains, and this he marked with the skulls of cattle. The king and his army followed the line of white, bleached skulls all one moonlight night, and in the morning they fell on the Moors and surprised them plenty. For his good work the spy got the name of Cow's Head, and with it a grant of land and a patent of nobility.

LONELY RIDER

by WES FARGO

Lonely Rider

IT was Curly Long, sitting on the bunkhouse steps, smoking, who saw him first. "F'r gosh sake, look what's comin'!" he gasped.

Idaho Sims took one long look and blinked as if he thought he might not be seeing straight. "Is it a man—or is it a hoss?" he demanded.

"Pussonal, I think it's a circus," said Cherokee Connors.

When the approaching object pulled up before the steps and broke into its two component parts, it became apparent that it was both a man and a horse. But what a man and what a horse!

The man was full six foot six, but his excessive skinniness made him look even taller. His dangling arms and long legs stuck out inches beyond the cuffs of his worn shirt and Levis. His hat had a hole in it and his boots were rundown. The lean, lantern-jawed face was seamed like an arroyo and his eyes were a faded, discouraged blue. Even his gun belt was weathered and worn, and the six-gun holstered to it hung more to the back than to the side.

The horse was almost as incredible as its rider. A dirty claybank with long neck and barrel, it seemed to run mostly to knees and hoofs, with long shanks that looked like knobby poplar posts.

Swinging down, the stranger approached the steps, leaving his mount ground-tied. Immediately the claybank dropped its ears, closed its eyes and apparently went to sleep.

"Mister," said the stranger, looking at Idaho, who was the oldest, "y'all needin' any extry hands round here?"

It was not Idaho who answered, but the crude, husky voice of Bronc Keller, coming up from the corral.

"Hell, no. Even if we was, we wouldn't be interested in no menagerie. Ride on 'fore somebody sees yuh an' laughs the Bar M off the range."

The stranger tugged at his old hat, blinked, and started to turn back toward his horse. "Well, I . . . I just thought I'd ask."

"Well, yuh been told," retorted Keller. "But hold on—"

The stranger stopped, turned back expectantly.

Keller laughed raucously. "All I wanted to know was about that hoss. Do you tie him like that, reg'lar, or do yuh generally prop 'im up?"

For one moment the stranger's eyes flickered. "That's funny—real funny," he said quietly. "Do I laugh at yuh—or with yuh?"

As Idaho chuckled, Keller pushed forward angrily. "Why, damn yore skinny hide, I'll—"

But suddenly at a warning *shush*, he halted. Charlie Malone, owner of the Bar M, had come around the corner of the bunkhouse, with Pete Hammond, the foreman. Trotting after them was little Chubby, Malone's three-year-old son and the pride of the Bar M.

Noting the undoubted respect which the foreman was according the owner, the stranger addressed his question to him. "You needin' any extry hands round here, mister?"

Malone stopped, stared, and looked again. "Mebbe," he said. "Can you ride?"

"Some," the stranger answered briefly.

"Can you rope? Can you throw a calf for branding?"

"Yeah, I can rope," the stranger said confidently. "An' if I can't

wrassle 'em calves down, I can generally trip 'em."

The owner of the Bar M hesitated. "Well, roundup's coming, but I don't know—" he began, and stopped.

The stranger was not even looking at him. He had turned to where the youngster, sighting the strange horse, was running toward him, laughing delightedly.

"Hey, sonny, yuh better stay 'way from that hoss," the stranger said quickly. "Yore maw wouldn't like it if yuh got dirty." Then, to the claybank, "Easy there, General. He ain't goin' to hurt yuh." At the same time he took two long strides and deftly plucked the crowing youngster back from too close to the claybank's heels.

"You mean Chubby might wake the hoss up, don't yuh?" said Bronc Keller with a jeering laugh.

But apparently Jim Malone had made up his mind swiftly, as was his custom. "All right. Forty a month an' found. Pete, here, will tell yuh what to do. What's your name?"

"Jones," said the stranger, his gaunt face looking relieved. "Just Jones."

BUT that night in the bunkhouse, Bronc Keller, who seemed irritated because the Bar M owner had taken the stranger on, gave him a more complete name. "Ichabod, that's yore name," he grinned maliciously. "Yep—Ichabod Jones."

Jones, going over the worn clothing in his dusty warbag, turned a mild eye toward Keller. "Who's Ichabod?"

"He was a scarecrow fella in a book Missus Malone's got in the main house," Keller informed him, chuckling, "an' he had a crowbait just like yourn. Yep, Ichabod—she suits you to a T."

Thereafter, to Keller at all times and to the other punchers when he was not present, the new hand was Ichabod Jones. If Jones realized the insult, he did not resent it.

That he could rope and wrestle calves became evident, the first circle the roundup crew made. With his elbows flapping and his long arm swinging, he noosed each brush-wild calf with speed and certainty. Throwing them at the branding fire, he did not need to use his weight. His long legs shot out, his arms took deft leverage—and there the calf was, waiting for the hot iron.

That he could ride was apparent, too, when the north range sweep was over and they returned to the headquarters ranch for additional mounts before starting the southern circle. And Jones did not just stick on a horse's back. He could really ride, as a cowboy means "ride."

It was Bronc Keller who started it. Bronc, who was the Bar M's broncbuster and was supposed to assign the new mounts of the last broken batch, turned to Ichabod one morning.

"I'm givin' yuh two new ponies f'r yore string," he told him. "You'll need 'em in that broken Hell Creek country. Better top 'em off today an' uncork 'em a bit 'fore we start out tomorrow."

Ichabod scratched his head. "Won't need but one extry, I reckon," he decided. "If it's bad country, I c'n use General, that private hoss o' mine."

"You'll use the two I give yuh," rasped Keller. "Can't have the roundup helt up 'cause that crowbait buckles up an' comes unhinged in the middle."

It was not until he was out at the corral with its milling horses, however, that Ichabod suspected there was anything wrong. Keller pointed with his hand.

"That black in there, with the white socks. Buckskin over there in the corner, too. Yuh better take the black first."

Ichabod looked the horses over. The black was a big, heavy animal, at least fifteen hands high. His head was tossing, his ears back, and even as Ichabod looked, the horse made a lightning slash with his teeth that sent a mare away squealing, and then lashed out with a wicked hoof at the buckskin which had come too close.

"You say that black's already broke?" he asked suspiciously.

Keller sneered. "What yuh reckon he's in there with the cavvy for, if he ain't? Ain't skeered, are yuh? I thought you said you could ride."

"I can ride—some," Ichabod told him. "But I never saw a broke horse act like that before." He turned to Idaho and Cherokee beside him. "Would you say that black acts broke?"

Idaho kept his mouth tight. A man was supposed to kill his own snakes on the Bar M spread. But Cherokee suddenly let out a curse. "Damn yuh, Keller, yuh know damn well that hoss ain't fit to ride!"

"Shut up, Cherokee—" snarled Keller.

"I'll ride 'im," Ichabod interrupted. "If these other boys here say that black is broke, all right. But givin' a bronc his fust ride, where I come from, is a ten-dollar job. If he ain't been broke, an' I ride 'im, it'll cost yuh ten dollars."

"Like hell it will!" Keller snorted.

"—and if I *don't* ride 'im," Ichabod went on, "I'll give *yuh* ten dollars. That fair, boys?"

"Plenty fair," said Cherokee shortly. "I'll hold the money."

Putting a worn ten-dollar bill into Cherokee's hand, Ichabod fetched out his own bridle and saddle. The trouble the three of them had roping and saddling the black was proof to Ichabod that his suspicions had been right.

With one swing Ichabod was in the saddle, while Cherokee at the same moment jerked the blindfold off. For a moment the black stood, hunched. Then he seemed to explode.

Fence-corner, straight bucking, sunfishing—the black did everything that a bad horse can do. Twice he drove into the corral bars with thuds that left the watching punchers gasping. Twice he reared up and threw himself full on his back, bawling and kicking. But each time Ichabod stepped out of the stirrups by a hair's breadth, only to step on again as the black scrambled to his feet. At the end of twenty minutes, Ichabod was panting, the blood running from his nose where the black's hammer-head had caught him. But the horse was a winded, lather-dripping wreck, spent and exhausted from its vain efforts to unseat the hated human on its back.

Ichabod swung down, came to the corral bars and climbed them. He looked from the red-faced Keller to Cherokee and Idaho.

"Well, was he a broke hoss, or does Keller owe me ten dollars?"

Idaho drew an amazed breath. "Ain't nobody—even Keller—been able to stay on that hoss more'n two jumps, up till now. The money's yours."

"Yeah, an' I figger the rest of us owe you three dollars apiece, too,"

grunted Cherokee. "That's what they charges at the rodeo. Only I ain't never seen even a rodeo cocklebur stick on top a tornado like that, fella."

Keller's face was like a thundercloud. It was Charlie Malone, coming from the ranchhouse porch, where he had been watching, who spoke next.

"If that was a joke, Keller," he said, frowning, "it was a damned poor one. Jones might have been killed. Now, take Black Hawk back into that side corral where he is supposed to be kept—and never let him in with the regular string again."

As Keller walked off, muttering, Idaho nodded to Ichabod.

"That Black Hawk's a killer. Missus Malone wanted to get rid of him a long time back, but the Old Man thinks he'd make a fine breed stallion—if he c'n ever get him anyways tame."

Ichabod looked at the black thoughtfully. "He could be tamed, but it might take a year. Looks to me like he's been treated bad. An' it takes twice as long to tame the badness out of a mistreated hoss, as it does to put it in."

AFTER that, without even a word among themselves, Cherokee, Idaho, and most of the other hands dropped all reference to "Ichabod." It was Lanky who finished the roundup, not Ichabod.

Except with Bronc Keller. Smarting under his defeat at the corral, Keller was not satisfied with Ichabod Jones; he changed the name to Ichabod Bones.

Cherokee took it upon himself to speak friendly about it with Jones. "Lanky," he said, "ain't that gun yo're wearin' no good?"

Jones looked at him, surprised. "Colt Peacemaker. Why?"

"Well," said Cherokee, "I reelize yo're not built right to tangle with Keller with yore fists. But they ain't no law agin' a slight man usin' a equalizer on a man bigger'n him."

But Jones shook his head. "I . . . I never believed in fightin' with yore own outfit. A man oughta be able to be friendly with them, if he can with anybody."

Cherokee gave it up.

"Timid, downright timid," he said sadly to Idaho. "Too bad. I could like that long bag o' bones if he wasn't so damn ugly, an' had a little more spunk."

"For a timid guy he shore rid hell outta that killer hoss," said Idaho, shaking his head. "Me, I'd ruther face a Colt gun, any day."

That was the way they came back to the Bar M, after the tough beef roundup was over in the fall. It was Saturday afternoon. All the boys were washing up, laughing and talking, getting into their best clothes to celebrate in Rocky Fork. Jones was off by himself in the corner. Finally he turned to Cherokee.

"How far is it to Rocky Fork, Cherokee?"

The cowhand looked his surprise. "Well, this time o' year it ain't but ten miles. Yuh can ford Hell Creek easy on the short-cut trail. But coupla weeks from now, when the fall rains come, she'll be a thirty-forty-mile ride, over the county bridge. You j'inin' us for a ride in tonight?"

Bronc Keller gave a jeering laugh. "Shore, shore. He's goin' in to give the girls at the Staghorn a treat. Ain't yuh, Ichabod?"

"No, I'm just ridin' in to buy a little red wagon," Jones answered gravely.

Keller started over, flushing, but

both Cherokee and Idaho stepped in between. "Go on an' slick yore own self up for them gals," said Cherokee roughly. "Ain't that enough for you, without startin' no fight here?"

Even Cherokee had thought Jones was being dangerously jocular —until next morning. Then, looking out of the bunkhouse window after sleeping till mid-morning, he suddenly caught Idaho's arm.

"Damned if he didn't buy a little red wagon!" he said.

Idaho peered through the smudged glass. Outside, Lanky's seamed, gnarled face was bent close over the curly head and laughing face of Chubby Malone. Beside him was not only a little toy express wagon, but a big rubber red ball as well. Only at the moment the youngster was neglecting them both. He was watching eagerly as Lanky, with a piece of string, built a cat's-cradle, and then "a corral fence, with a horsey inside."

"Maybe he's ugly to grown-ups, but cows an' hosses an' kids don't seem to shy from him none," said Cherokee. "D'ja ever stop to think, Idaho, it may be 'cause he knows he's so ugly that he's so timid around grown folks?"

Maybe it was because of the youngster's liking that Charlie Malone kept the lanky rider on, even though beef roundup was over and the fall rains almost due to strike.

Strike they did, as only rains can hit in that country. At noon they struck, with great lightning crashes that rattled the bunkhouse windows and sent the punchers scurrying inside. All afternoon they watched the thunderclouds chase each other over the Rocky Hills, each one bringing more lightning and thunder, more bursts of water from the opened-up heavens. Within minutes the water was pouring in floods from the overflowing rain barrels.

It was Lanky, smoking in the bunkhouse door near dusk, who first heard the scream. Sudden, shrill, terrified—as only a woman can scream. It seemed to come from beyond the ranchhouse, from the back where the corral came close.

In a split second Lanky was in motion, his long legs racing, the rain beating unnoticed on his leaky Stetson and worn shirt. Idaho and Cherokee, getting a late start, were many yards behind him as he turned the ranchhouse corner.

What they saw when they got there was something to make them stand dead still. In the corral, Lanky Jones was fighting off a tornado of slashing teeth and black, lashing legs. They saw him dodge one skull-crushing hoof, strike the ugly black hammerhead squarely between the eyes with his drenched Stetson, while at the same moment he jerked something small and limp toward the corral bars.

On her knees outside, reaching frantically through the bars, was Mary Malone, her face white, her mouth still open from that last scream.

Then as Cherokee and Idaho yelled and tried to force their stumbling legs to extra speed, it was over. The woman's clutching arms caught the limp bundle, jerked it through the bars. And Lanky, driving the killer bronc back with one last slash of the hat, was down and rolling through the bars himself just in time to escape the flailing hoofs. Rolling between the bars where only his skinniness allowed him to roll through a space no bigger than a child's body.

"Dead—he's dead!" Mary Malone screamed as she hugged the limp figure of Chubby close to her. Then

she gave another cry, "No! He's still breathing! But he's badly hurt. The doctor—for God's sake, somebody go for the doctor!"

"I'll go!" It was Cherokee who said that, wide-eyed and white himself. And Idaho promptly echoed him: "Me, too!"

BUT Pete Hammond, puffing as he ran up, shook his head. "Hell Creek'll be fast as a mill race. Ain't man or a hoss can swim the ford now, not with the dark comin' on fast. An' it's thirty-forty miles around by the bridge."

Lanky Jones stood up, wiping the mud from his face.

"Three of us'll go," he said. "One of us oughta get through. But mebbe somebody else better ride the bridge way, in case we don't make it."

They did not need to be told the story of how Chubby had got hurt. The flattened and battered pieces of red rubber that the black horse was still slashing with his hoofs told that. Told of the youngster playing on the back porch, and racing after the ball when it had bounced off and through the corral bars.

Charlie Malone came to them as they were dragging their saddles and bridles from the pegs.

"I wouldn't ask any man to try to cross Hell Creek in the dark," he said huskily, his face white. "But I can't ask yuh not to, either. And if you do make it—well, I don't have to tell you what it means to his mother."

Cherokee and Idaho were already roping out their mounts. But when Lanky swung his own loop, Cherokee shook his head.

"Get a real hoss, Lanky," he said. "And," he added, "even a real hoss'll need all he's got to cross that mill race."

But Lanky shook his head. "I'm better used to this-n," he said quietly.

And much to the surprise of Cherokee and Idaho, it was not the claybank who took the mud in the rear. It was their own gray and sorrel. In the beat of the rain and the crash of the thunder, it seemed as if the claybank had a sudden rebirth of energy. Long legs stretched out to eat up the ground, and horse and rider seemed one as they drove ahead over the uneven ground.

Spurring hard, Idaho and Cherokee brought the gray and sorrel even with the claybank.

"It'll be the gittin' over that's hard," bawled Idaho. "Ten-foot bank on the other side for miles, an' only one break in 'er where a hoss can scramble up. But the bank this side is easy, comin' back."

"Ten foot o' hell tother side—an' the devil waitin' below," affirmed Cherokee. "Run's through a chute there, if you misses, that's worse'n a trough."

When they drew up momentarily at the edge of the water, Lanky Jones could well see what they meant. By the lightning flashes he could see Hell Creek, ordinarily a shallow stream, now rushing fast and black a hundred yards wide. The opposite bank rose like a wall except for one narrow place a dozen or so feet wide, where some little side gully added its drain of water.

"Got to hit that gully or not at all," Cherokee warned. "An' she's fast, hellish fast between." He drew a deep breath, spurred forward into the water. "Well, if I don't see yuh, so long, boys."

Idaho had swung his mount a dozen feet upstream. "One of us has gotta get through, Lanky," he

said. "An' . . . an' I hope it's yuh or Cherokee."

Then he, too, was on his way, spurring out into the swollen creek.

Almost immediately, it seemed to Idaho, the water, like mighty fingers, was plucking at him and his horse. The sorrel kicked and plunged as its feet were swept off bottom, then Idaho jerked his head around and upstream. After what seemed hours of fighting, a flashing bolt showed him Cherokee and his gray downstream, splashing desperately. He saw Cherokee's gray swung around, half-rolled over. Then the next flash showed him only the horse's head, upthrown in a surge of black.

But Idaho had no time to see anything else. For at that moment his own sorrel was swung around by the surging water, just as the opening in the bank showed ahead. But he was abreast of it already, was below it. He strove hard to pull the sorrel's head upstream. And then out of the night a great uprooted cottonwood reared up almost in front of him. Its whirling, splashing limbs swept over him, tore him out of the saddle. He clutched it, strangling, as it swirled around and whirlpooled for the other shore. The rush of the creek entering its chute was already loud in his ears.

And then, shoulder-deep near the lower shore, he caught a glimpse of something half white. Cherokee's gray. Cherokee's voice yelled even above the rush of the flood. "Yore arm! Raise yore arm, Idaho!"

As the lightning flashed again, Idaho let go, lifted one arm desperately overhead. The cottonwood jerked around and away, the night came back doubly dark after the flash. But in that dark something closed around Idaho's arm, all but jerked it from its roots. Strangling, choking, alternately under and above water, Idaho was dragged in until he found foothold. Two minutes later he was standing alongside Cherokee and the gray on the bank they had but recently left.

"Couldn't make it. Aimed too low," Cherokee said hoarsely. "Held onto the stirrups an' the old gray mare drug me in. But she wrenched a shoulder doin' it."

"See anything of Lanky? Did he make it?" Idaho voiced the thought uppermost in his mind.

Cherokee shook his head. "Never got a sight of him." He hitched awkwardly at his dripping overalls. "Dammit, there went a *man*."

STUMBLING through the brush and mud with awkward boots, and leading the limping gray behind, they were long in coming to the home stable. There, even before going for dry clothing himself, Cherokee insisted on rubbing down the tired horse, and Idaho gave willing assistance.

"Yo're goin' to live on the fat o' the land from now on, old hoss," Cherokee said gratefully.

"Sugar an' milk with yore oats, if you want it," declared Idaho. He paused suddenly. "Hey, sounds like hosses. It *is* hosses, dammit!"

They stepped out of the stable and looked toward the lighted ranchhouse. The bunkhouse windows were all alight, too. But it was the excited voices from the house that held the two punchers' attention.

"Made it, by thunder!" said Cherokee in awe. "He made it! I c'n hear the doctor talkin'."

"Well, there ain't nothin' we can do up there now," Idaho said gruffly. "But there is somethin' we can do—in the bunkhouse. I wanta

ask Keller how come that killer hoss was in that corral ag'in."

Together they sloshed through the mud and into the bunkhouse. Pete Hammond was there and Dutch, the cook, and all the other Bar M hands, including Bronc Keller in the corner.

Keller's face was oddly flushed, his eyes bloodshot. His lips curled as Idaho and Cherokee stepped into the light.

"The return o' the heroes, huh?" he jeered. "An' damn if here ain't the other one—Ichabod Bones!"

Through the door almost on the heels of Cherokee and Idaho had stepped Lanky. His hair was snarled and muddy, his face was brush-torn and bleeding. He stepped straight toward Keller.

"It ain't account o' myself I'm doin' this, Keller," he said slowly. "It's account o' the boy. Put up yore hands. I'm goin' to beat yore head off."

For one instant Keller looked startled. Then he laughed. "Me? Beat me? I've just been waitin' for this!"

He came with a rush, swinging his fists like flails.

Then for the second time, the Bar M got the surprise of its life. Just as it had the day in the corral.

Because instead of going down at the first blow, the lanky puncher seemed to sway and twist like a human hurricane. But out of that swing and twisting were coming pile-driver fists. They ripped at Keller, spun him sideways, beat him back, and yet back again. Those lanky arms coiled themselves like iron ropes when Keller tried to wrestle him down, ripped him up the middle until he broke away, and then hammered at his face and head again. Staggering, spitting blood, Keller made one last rush, to be met with a lip-crushing blow that dropped him groaning into the corner.

THEN Lanky turned quietly to his warbag and holstered gun and belt where they lay on his bunk. "I reckon I better be leavin' you boys—"

"Look out!" yelled Pete Hammond suddenly. "He's got his gun!"

Clawing up off the floor, his face twisted with pain and rage, Keller had snatched for his gun, had it half out of the leather.

But no one saw Lanky's hand move. It was just a blur of motion. And though one moment Keller had seen the holstered gun feet away on the bed, the next moment he saw it pointed straight at his shrinking middle. No, not just pointing at it, grinding into it, until the muzzle seemed to be pushing his stomach in against his very backbone.

"Take that gun away from him," Lanky said wearily. "I . . . I don't wanta have to kill 'im."

Cherokee stepped over, took the half-drawn gun out of Keller's hand. He hurled it into the corner, under the bunks. And then he slapped Keller full in the face with his open hand.

"An' that's somethin' I been waitin' to do for a long time, too," he said coldly.

Feet sounded at the bunkhouse door. It was Charlie Malone. He halted, stared coldly at Keller.

"The boy'll get well, the doc says," he rumbled, "but it's no fault of yours, Keller. I reckon you didn't think I knew you had that bottle hid in the stable. But you went too far when you got drunk an' let Black Hawk into that corral again after I told you not to."

Keller stared at him, shrank back from the grim accusation in his voice.

Lanky turned around from his bunk where he had been pulling together his few loose belongings, shoving them into his bag.

"Mr. Malone," he said, "I . . . I reckon you better give me my time. I always said that when a man couldn't get along without fightin' with his saddle mates, it was time for him to be leavin'."

Malone shook his head. "If that's why you're leaving, you don't have to. Wouldn't let you leave now, anyway." He held out his hand toward Keller. There was a little wad of banknotes crumpled and green in his palm. "There's yore time, Keller. An' you needn't wait till morning."

Lanky stopped fiddling with his warbag and turned around slowly. His seamed, scratched fase was working and his faded blue eyes almost glowed.

"Did . . . did yuh mean that, Mr. Malone?" he said wonderingly. "Yuh really mean yuh want me to, stay on here?"

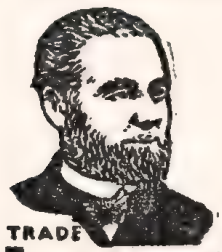
"Mean it?" Malone rubbed at his eyes, made a choking sound in his throat. "Just try to get away, that's all. There'll always be a place for you here, I . . . I reckon."

Cherokee was staring at the lanky puncher as Malone talked. What he saw made him ram his elbow into Idaho's ribs.

"Why, dammit, he don't look like a lost maverick no more! He don't even look so ugly—"

"Ugly?" Idaho answered in the same husky whisper. "*Ugly?* Hell, I just wish I was half as good-lookin' as that fella must look—to God and the Malones!"

THE END.



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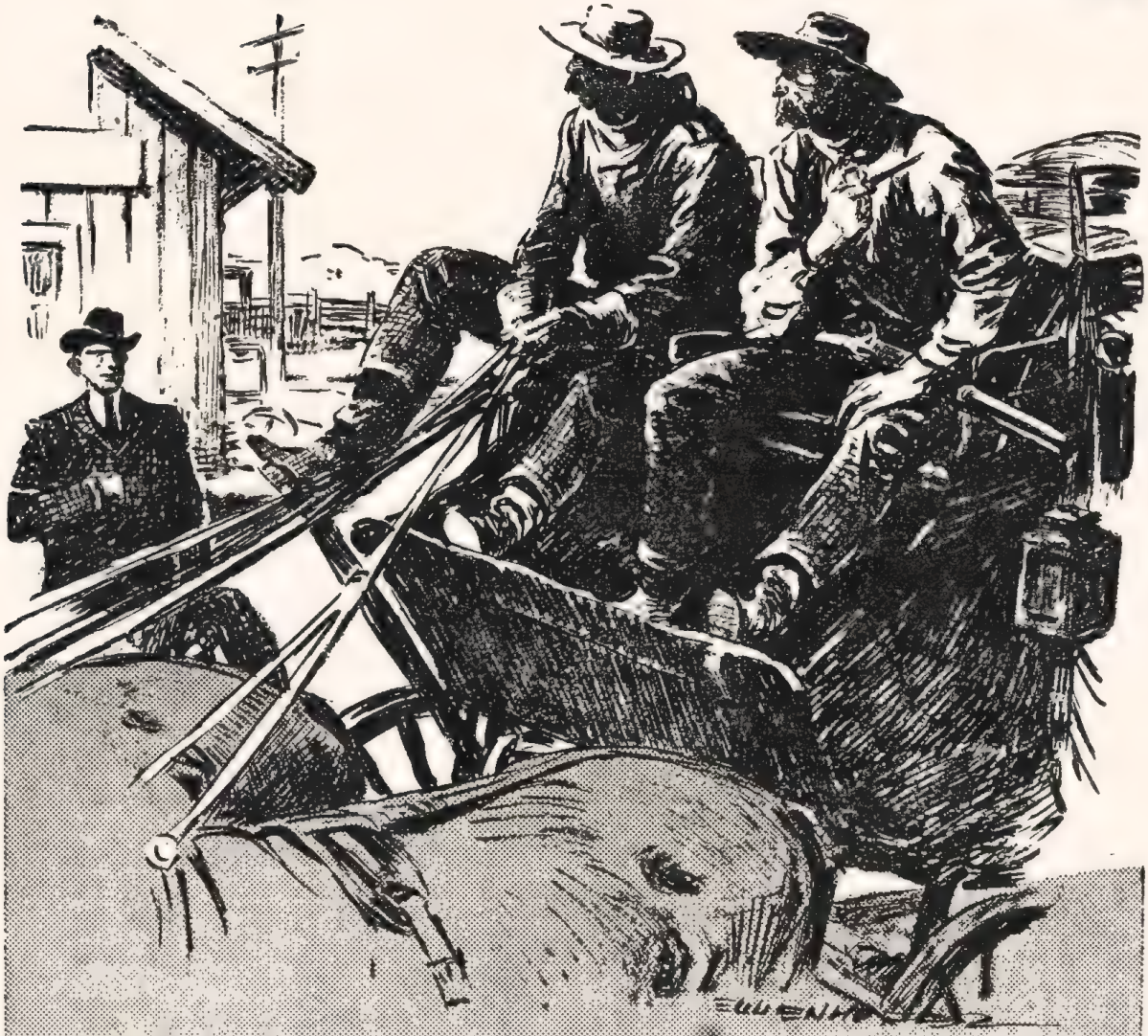


by RAMON F. ADAMS

Caesar Goes West

SOGGY, the cook for the Swinging L crew, never joined the circle of riders around the campfire after supper unless he had a yarn on his chest that he wanted to unload. While washing his dishes, he had overheard Red Tucker telling of the time he had been to a real theatre when he had gone to Chicago with a load of cattle. So on this night, when he settled himself near the fire and solemnly built himself a smoke, we knew we were about to hear a story.

"Speakin' of op'rys," he began, after getting the attention he knew his presence deserved, "reminds me of the days 'way back 'fore I began jugglin' pots and pans. I'm drivin' stage them days, and my run's from Beardance to Cactus City, twelve miles south.

"Cactus never gits over Beardance beatin' 'er out of the railroad and that's why them Cactusites wail and grind down their teeth. Not bein' able to build a railroad of 'er own she sets up nights tryin' to figger some way to outdo Beardance.

"Beardance has jes' pulled off a blowout and is a-laughin' at Cactus for bein' the calliope of the parade. A few snickers like Beardance hands out sho' puts Cactus in a sod-pawin' mood, so a meetin's called to devise ways of goin' Beadrance one better.

"After they fill their finger nails with enough dandruff, some wise jigger suggests enlargin' the dance hall stage and hirin' one o' them op'ry troupes to put on a show. This hits the bull's-eye and they start to work. But they can't find a show troupe that's a-rarin' to visit such a jumpin' off place. They fin'lly have to be satisfied with bringin' one o' them acter fellers out by hisself to put on a show with their own herd o' longhorns.

"As I said before, me bein' driver o' the stage runnin' 'tween them two towns, I'm what yuh might call a neutral citizen o' both. Shotgun Saunders, my messenger, enjoys the same priv'leges.

"Well, fin'lly this acter feller arrives and me and Shotgun hauls 'im from the train to Cactus. He looks jes' like one o' them magazine pictures advertisin' stiff collars, and he don't look like he can teach a settin' hen to cluck.

"'It does one's heart good,' he says, 'to discover that our brothers of the far West are hungerin' to learn and 'preciate the thespian art.'

"'These hombres don't crave no art 'cept art-tillery,' Shotgun snickers. 'All they're hungerin' for is to slip one over on Beardance.'"

THE dude's name is Reginald, but by the time we git to Cactus we're callin' 'im Reggy and he knows the whole history of our scary past. Knowin' that we've got the pedigree of ever' pelican in town, he insists that we have supper with 'im at the hotel and give 'im some inside dope. He seems a hog for action and wants to start right in, as he says, 'outlinin' his dramatis person-eye.'

"'I think I'll put on somethin' by Shakespeare. His rôles are my fav'rite,' he confides.

"'Does this Nerv'us Spear Injun have much of a roll?' asks Shotgun.

"'Don't mind 'im,' I says to Reggy, 'he's so ign'rant he'd go to a locksmith for lockjaw.'

"'You ain't so edjecated yo'self,' Shotgun informs me. 'I 'member when you thought the mouth o' the Pecos had teeth.'

"'I might put on "Much Ado 'Bout nothin'. resumes Reggy.

" 'That'll be fine,' I says. 'Give Shotgun there the part o' Nothin'.'

" 'That other part Mucha Due would suit you fine, Soggy. You owe ever'body,' answers this animated shoestring. He's so ign'rant he's funny.

" 'No, I think "Julius Caesar" would be better,' says Reggy, payin' no more heed to us than a stampedin' cow does to cobwebs.

" 'Does he really seize 'er?' asks Shotgun. 'The boys might not like any rough stuff.'

"By this time we're out on the porch so Reggy can view the citizens and git ideas on pickin' his cast, as he calls it. The first feller he spies is Zeb Parks.

" 'Who's that gentleman?' he asks.

" 'That's Zeb Parks, the lawyer,' I answers, 'but he ain't never been accused o' bein' a gentleman before.'

" 'A lawyer? He should be the one to play Mark Anth'ny,' says Reggy, enthusiastically markin' somethin' down in a little book.

" 'Yeah, but he practices 'fore the wrong bar,' Shotgun tells 'im. 'He's goin' in the Longhorn now to auger a case with the bartender. And say, what kind of a mark is this anth'ny?

"About that time Butch Baker strolls up and I interduces 'im to Reggy.

" 'Pleased to meetcha,' says Butch, shakin' hands.

" 'He's pleased to meat ever'body,' grins Shotgun. 'He runs the butcher shop.' Shotgun's kinda witty at times.

"Butch is 'bout half drunk and he don't stay long, him bein' more interested right then in likker than in learnin'.

"Reggy mentions he'll put 'im down for Cash Us, or some such Injun name.

" 'Shotgun,' says Reggy, 'I'll put you in the mob scene.'

" 'Not me,' snorts Shotgun, 'I seen a mob once 'fore they seen me. That's why I left Texas.'

REGGY'S doin' right well with 'is cast, that is, he's doin' well gittin' names on paper, till Widder Jones passes and hands 'im one o' her famous smiles. After that he loses all interest in casts 'cept castin' 'is eyes on her. It's love at first sight and he goes plumb blind.

" 'Who's she?' he asks, fin'lly comin' out o' his trance.

" 'That's Widder Jones, the official heart-smasher o' Cactus,' I tells 'im.

" 'Ah, she's a dream,' sighs Reggy, and I know he's hit hard. Shotgun says somethin' 'bout a nightmare, but Reggy don't hear 'im and it's jes' as well 'cause he might not like no such hoss talk.

" 'Here comes 'er shadder, Overbit Johnson,' I says. 'He'll make you a good villyun.'

"But Reggy don't hear me. He's still dreamin'.

" 'The man that wins the widder'll have 'im to whip,' I continues, and that wakes Reggy up.

" 'What's that?' he asks cautiously.

" 'Overbit there's been courtin' the widder as far back as an Injun can remember,' I says. 'Was doin' right well too, till he gits in a fight with a jigger from Beardance. When this feller bites the top o' Overbit's ear off—that's where he gits 'is name—Overbit's whipped and turns yeller as a dand'lion. After that the widder kinda puts 'im on the shelf, as it were. Her ideal has to have sand in 'is craw, so now he's jes' a minnow in 'er fish pond. But Overbit ain't give up.

" 'The widder she likes Overbit a heap, but she don't let 'im know it, and she works overtime flirtin' to make 'im jealous. She might be a

grass-widder, but she don't let none of it grow under 'er feet. She figgers that some day she'll make Overbit desprit' 'nough to do somethin' to win 'er. He used to be a bully 'fore this hombre from Beardance chews a steak offn 'is ear. He drinks a lot and won't serve as no shinin' light in a heap o' ways, but he's so faithful the whole town's a-pullin' for 'im to win. They'd make a nice team, too!'

" 'Yeah, they would, her bein' a grass widder and 'im a rake. Some hay crop, I'd say,' scoffs Shotgun. He's been hit by the widder's smiles hisself and he's a little jealous o' Overbit.

" 'I must meet 'er,' says Reggy.

" 'You'll meet 'er all right,' I answers. "She'll see that you do.'

"Well, Reggy soon gits 'is cast together, but he finds that if he puts on the entire play he'll have to use pretty nigh the whole pop'lation and won't have 'nough folks left to make an aud'jence, so he says he'll cull it to the one act where Caesar's killed.

"Him and the widder's gittin' 'long like two pups in a basket. She ain't in the show, but she never misses a rehearsal, and the way she's treatin' Overbit'd make an icicle seem plumb feverish. Reggy gittin' 'er smiles thataway makes Overbit happy as a hawg bein' pulled from a feed trough.

"In the play Reggy's to be Caesar —some sort o' emp'ror over the other Roman candles. Where he makes 'is mistake is lettin' Overbit act the part of a guy called Brutus and givin' 'im a chance to use a skinnin' knife.

AFTER several weeks' practice Reggy fin'lly gits them waddies so they can speak their speeches and you can kinda halfway understan' what they're a-talkin' 'bout. The day for the show's set and Cactus advertises 'erself as the center o' culture.

"But when Reggy tells the boys they'll have to wear short skirts and bare hocks like them ancient Romans, these amitoor acters rare up and quit cold. They 'low they're raised modest and don't go in for no leg show, so Reggy has to comp'mise by lettin' 'em keep on their pants and boots and drape 'emselves in sheets.

"The big night fin'lly arrives and the dance hall's crowded. Them fellers that's been 'liminated when the show's cut down are all there, drunk and mad at bein' deprived of the chance o' showin' off their actin' talents. The sheriff's at the front door checkin' ever'body's guns to keep down promisc'us shootin'.

"The widder's up in the front row dressed like an Injun for a powwow. When ever'thing's ready the sheriff comes down and sets beside her in the front row to keep order, wearin' the only gun in the house.

"Reggy comes out first and explains the play so's we can read 'er brand, and he tells why they've put part of it into the cut-backs. When the curtain's hoisted we see a lot o' big columns rep'sentin' the marble pillars o' the emp'ror's headquarters.

"Reggy enters wearin' a pasteboard crown and leadin' a reg'lar night-shirt parade. He says somethin' 'bout 'the Ides o' March are come,' and some other pelican answers, 'Eye, Caesar, but not gone.' But the danged thing come and went 'fore we knowed what they're talkin' 'bout.

"Well, the show runs 'long pretty good 'cept we don't savvy what a lot o' them four-pound words mean. Then Caesar makes a big speech. The widder liked to never stopped clappin' 'er hands, and I seen Over-

bit wearin' down 'is bridle teeth. It seems like most o' them sheet wearers are tryin' to git Caesar to forgive some hombre, and that's when he makes 'is speech tellin' 'em there's nothin' doin'.

"Some card sharp named Deckus says, 'Great Caesar,' soundin' like a preacher tryin' to cuss. And when Caesar says somethin' 'bout 'Doth not Brutus bootless kneel?', ever'-body snickers, 'cause Overbit musta forgot to take off said boot.

"Zeb Parks, who's playin' Mark Anth'ny, is three sheets in the wind and tryin' to hide the fact under the one he's a-wearin'. He gits anxious to be noticed and steps to the front and says, 'Gem'men o' zury' like he's goin' to make a plea.

"'Not yet, not yet,' hisses Reggy out o' the flank o' his mouth.

I MEAN frien's, Romans and countrymen. Loan me yo' ears,' continues Zeb, takin' the bridle in 'is teeth.

"'Use yo' own, ain't they big 'nough?' yells somebody in the rear.

"'You want 'em for Overbit? He needs a new pair,' shouts another drunk back in the drags, and that don't help Overbit's humor none.

"'I come to bury Zeezar—' begins Zeb ag'in like he ain't been interrupted.

"'Not yet. I'm not dead yet, you boob,' says Reggy, a-shovin' Zeb back.

"'No, not *yet*,' sneers Overbit with meanin'. The whole aud'jence hears 'im, and I can tell Reggy don't like the way he utters them words.

"'Whoosa boob?" asks Zeb, swingin' a haymaker for Reggy's jaw. Reggy dodges and it ketches Butch in the brisket.

"Fin'lly they git ever'thing straightened out ag'in and some guy says, 'Speak, hands, for me.' Them foreigners like to do their talkin' with their hands. Then they drawed knives like they're goin' to butcher Reggy. Looks like Butch could 'a' done that job hisself. I've seen 'im butcher a steer with a lot less help.

"Reggy then shouts some French words like 'Et two, Brutay,' and some disappointed acter in the back o' the house answers, 'You oughter jes' et one, brute.'

"Overbit's got a skinnin' knife in 'is paw and murder in 'is eye. Reggy sees that look and tries to dodge. Jes' as Overbit makes a slash, *splat!* a ripe egg hits 'im right 'tween the eyes. Spoiled egg, spoiled aim, jes' like that!

"Reggy yells, 'Then falls Caesar,' but he can't seem to fall. In fact, he looks like he's doin' 'is best to keep from it. Overbit's knife's cut Ruggy's galluses in two and 'is pants are fallin' down 'round 'is knees. He's staggerin' 'round like a pup a-huntin' a soft spot to lie down in, while Overbit's plenty busy a-clawin' the egg out of 'is eyes. It looks like the yeller's a-comin' to the surface ag'in.

"Then Reggy loses 'is balance and rams 'is head into one 'o them new near-marble pillars, and it takes a tumble right out toward the aud'-jence. The sheriff's jes' got to 'is feet, seemin' to realize all this ain't in the show. 'Bout that time the pillar cracks 'im on the head where there ain't no hair and he goes to sleep on the hardest pillar he's ever laid his head on.

"Reggy manages to git 'is pants up and tries to do a wire walkin' act on the pillar to git away from that knife and Overbit. He then runs a foot race up the aisle for the front door, and he's so skairt he forgets to notice the widder when she calls to 'im.

"Overbit jumps from the stage,

points that knife like he's takin' aim, then throws it down in disgust. He ain't used to knives. Seein' the gun stickin' in the sheriff's holster, he seizes it and take a quick shot at that flyin' sheet as it goes through the door.

"The widder throws 'er arms 'round 'im to hold 'im back, but he's so mad he fergits hisself and acts like a reg'lar caveman. That's jes' what she likes. She's never made up 'er mind to take Overbit 'cause he's always too meek and gentle, so when he gives 'er a shove and pushes 'er down by the sheriff, she's happy as a lark. Overbit starts up the aisle to send Reggy wingin' 'is way to St. Peter, when one o' them disappointed fellers who claims Reggy's a pore chooser of acters, yells:

"'Give 'im no quarter, Overbit.'

I WOULDN'T even give 'im a nickel,' answers Overbit, but jes' then somebody who don't like gore trips 'im, and he goes down like a felled beef.

"Reggy's outside yellin' somethin' 'bout 'A hoss, a hoss, my kingdom for a hoss!' so me and Shotgun sneaks out to help 'im make the trade.

"'Here, Reggy,' I says, 'take this hoss. He ain't broke to ghosts so you'd better shuck that sheet, but I reckon you can stay on 'im till you git to Beardance.'

"'And never mind the kingdom,' advises Shotgun, 'you'd better flag yo' kite 'fore Overbit gits here, or it'll be Kingdom Come. He's sho' got 'is bristles up.'

"Reggy don't stop for no kissin' and he's makin' far apart tracks pronto. Back in the dance hall there's a lot o' yellin' goin' on and we wonder if they're cheerin' us for helpin' Reggy make 'is getaway, but we're wrong.

"Overbit and the widder's in each other's arms and the aud'jence is cheerin' 'cause the hero's won 'is ladylove. That ripe egg don't eggs-actly make Overbit smell like a tube rose, but the widder don't seem to know which is the bad egg, him or the one he's a-wearin'.

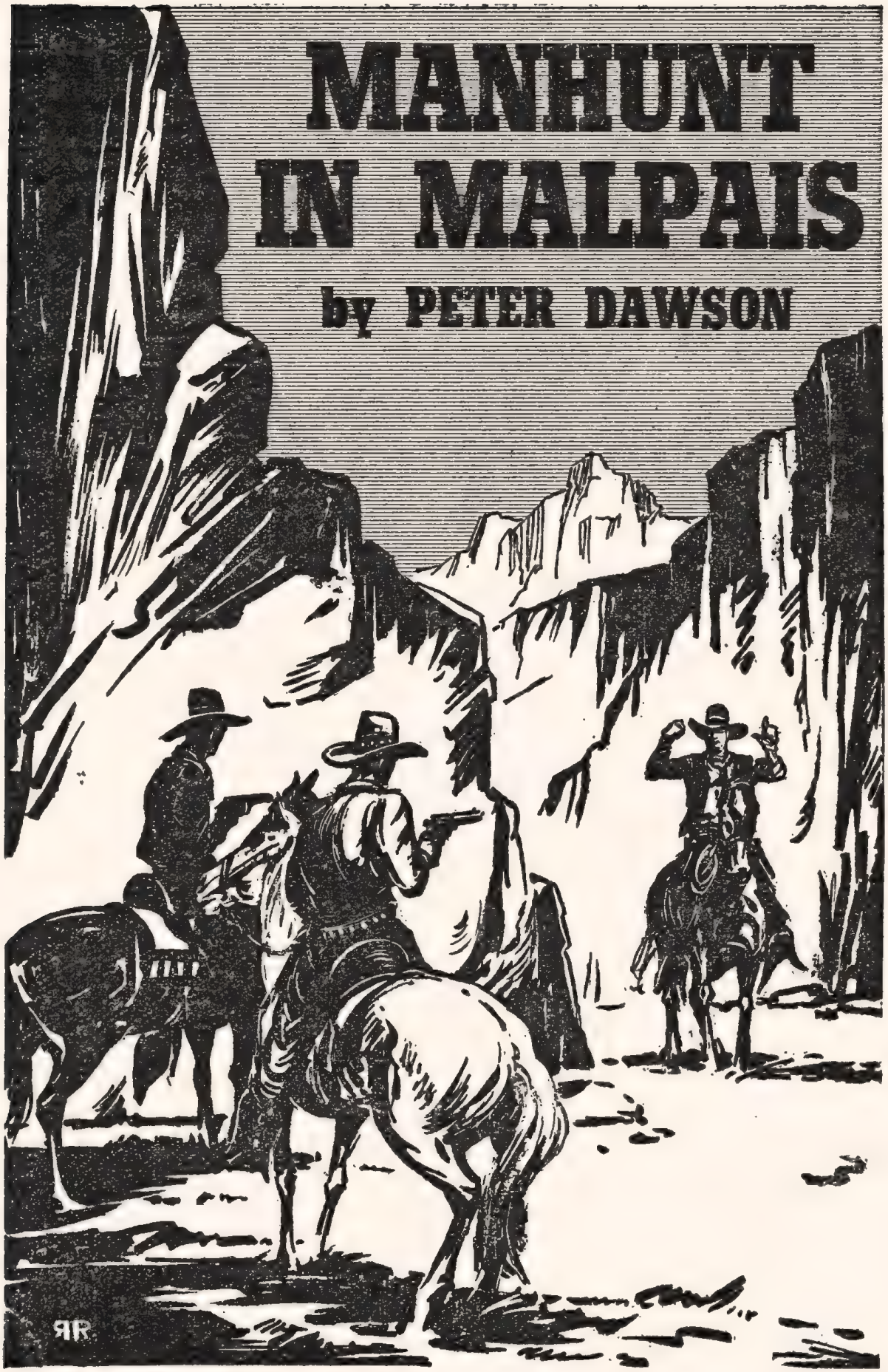
"The sheriff wakes up a-grabbin' for 'is gun and fightin' like he's havin' a bad dream.

"'Stop! Stop!' he yells. 'I'm the limb o' the law.'

"'Shucks, you ain't even a little twig,' snickers Shotgun givin' 'im another shove ag'in the pillar.

"'Come on,' he says to me, 'let's git a drink. I'd ruther have a dram than *all* yo' dram-a!'"

THE END.


MANHUNT
IN MALPAIS
by PETER DAWSON
RR

Manhunt In Malpais

CHAPTER I

GUNPOWDER WELCOME

AT Willow, fully sixty miles along Bill Legell's back trail, the hostler at a livery barn had looked at him sharply when he asked the quickest way to Malpais. The hostler's glance had run over Legell's tall frame, taken in his unshaven face and the two tied-down Colts at his thighs.

"Quickest way to Malpais? That depends."

It was evidently the six-guns and the way they were worn that decided him, for he went on, "You could take the road in, but that way you'd waste twenty miles. Your best bet is the pass between them two highest peaks. It's shorter—and there's less company."

This last, the hint that the trail through the pass was little-traveled, had decided Bill Legell. He wasn't anxious to advertise his coming. Last night, after making camp, he'd transferred his U. S. deputy marshal badge from his shirt pocket to the inside of the sweatband in his Stetson.

Today, riding up into the high pass through the Wigwams, across the boulder fields and down the far side, he'd had the faintly marked trail entirely to himself.

Now, halfway the length of a high-walled canyon that emptied onto the grama grass plain below, he was idly wondering what he'd find in Malpais, why it was that the hostler had directed him to take this out-of-the-way trail into the country.

The commissioner's instructions had been brief, rather ominous: "We know now who killed Fred Sims. The gent's name is Bond—Ed Bond. You'll find him runnin' a spread in the hills above Malpais. Go down there and get him. From what I hear it won't be easy. There's trouble in Malpais. Keep clear of it, but don't let it stop you!"

The quiet remoteness of this canyon, the absence of any fresh sign along it, and Bill Legell's thoughts as to what faced him must have dulled his wariness. For as he rounded a bend of the canyon, putting his roan into the gravelly bottom of the wash to skirt a high finger-outcropping, he didn't notice the two riders ahead until his roan lifted its ears and nickered. That sign brought Bill's glance up, sent his right hand instinctively toward holster.

His hand hung above gun butt a fraction of a second; then, along with his left, lifted to the level of his ears. He was staring into the bores of two Colt .45s. The faces of the men behind the guns were set uncompromisingly, their eyes bright with hostility.

GO ahead, stranger. Make your try!" drawled the tallest of the two, a lean-faced puncher whose thin lips were etched with a mirthless smile and whose keen blue eyes were granite hard. He waited a moment for his words to carry, then added tauntingly, "Don't tell me that one of Bruce Tonkin's hard-cases is losin' his guts against Ed Bond!"

"Who's Bruce Tonkin?" Bill Legell queried, more to play for time than out of curiosity. The stunning realization that he was face to face with the man he was hunting didn't show in his expression.

"He's like the rest, Ed," the second rider, a much older man, said to his companion. "Let's get it over

with!" He jerked his six-gun a bare inch in a menacing gesture.

Came a sharp call from above Bill Legell:

"Easy, Grubstake! We aren't killers—yet!"

The tenor of that voice, its musical quality, brought Bill Legell's glance swinging upward. What he saw perched at the crest of the outcropping, twenty feet above, was the figure of a girl with clear blue eyes looking down at him over the sights of a Winchester. Her outfit was a blue denim split-skirt, and a bright yellow blouse. She wore no hat over her dark chestnut hair, and Bill momentarily doubted that she could accurately sight her weapon in the full glare of the sun. Then he changed his mind, for the round hole of the rifle's barrel was lined squarely at him and the eyes behind it were steady.

"Watch him while I get his irons, Grubstake," said Bond. He climbed out of his saddle and crossed the twenty feet that separated him from Bill Legell.

"You've got a thing or two wrong here," Bill protested, his hands still up. "This is my first time in the country, I don't know your man Tonkin and don't want to know him. Can't a man ride through and—"

The girl's low-pitched, scornful laughter cut in on his speech. "Not through here, stranger," she said. "There's a road to Malpais. It's used by everyone but outlaws and the guns Bruce Tonkin has been bringing in. You're one or the other."

"Let me do it, Miss Helen?" Grubstake, an oldster with a hay-colored longhorn mustache, said stridently. "The only way to beat Tonkin is to cut down his men as they come! There's a hundred cutbanks within half a mile we could cave in over him."

"Get his guns, Ed," the girl said shortly, ignoring Grubstake's plea. And with that, the tall puncher stepped in alongside the roan and gingerly lifted Bill's right-hand Colt from leather.

When Grubstake looked upward, Bill permitted himself a quick glance above at the girl. For a split-second she took her eyes from him, looking across at Grubstake. And in that brief interval Bill kicked his left boot from stirrup and rolled out of the saddle.

Ed, his back halfway turned as he stepped away, was caught with his six-gun lowered. Bill landed solidly against his shoulder, his right hand stabbing down to wrench loose the Colt from Ed's grasp. Ed fell to his knees, and Bill rolled free and was coming to his feet, swinging up the weapon, when the shot cut loose.

It was the girl's rifle from above that exploded, and at the exact instant its sharp *crack!* sounded out Bill Legell felt a searing pain burn across the bunched muscles at the small of his back. It caused him to whirl away from Ed. Grubstake fired, the throaty roar of the Colt pluming a spurt of dust from the sand at Bill's feet. Then, before he could turn, Ed's weight crashed into him from behind.

Bill fell forward, trying to swing his six-gun around. But Ed beat it down in one quick stroke of his arm. And as Bill hit the hard-packed sand and felt the air sough out of his lungs, he looked back over his shoulder in time to see Ed's fist swing in a short hard blow. He tried to dodge, couldn't, and the driving punch lit solidly behind his ear, blotting out his senses in a wave of blood-red light.

HOURS later the cut of a rawhide lariat against the smarting flesh of Bill Legell's wrists jerked him back to consciousness. He steadied his wabbling head, opened his eyes, and found himself staring through darkness along the dimly lit length of an unfamiliar street. The next moment he heard a shout and a man came out of the shadows of the awninged plank walk up ahead and ran toward him. Bill Legell became vaguely aware of several things in the moments that followed. He was tied securely into his own saddle, his arms were bound behind him, and the pain of the bullet burn along the small of his back sent a sharp throb coursing up his muscles at each stride that the roan took. A heavy weight dragged at his neck and pounded slightly at his chest. He didn't know why the man running toward him was shouting, he didn't know why other shouts joined the first, nor why he soon became the center of a milling crowd.

The thing that interested him most was that two men caught the nervous roan's reins and held the animal while three more reached up and untied the length of rawhide so that he could move his arms. As he bent forward in the saddle, the weight sagged off his chest and he looked down to see his twin belts and his two holstered six-guns hanging there. Others saw that now in the dim light and a low mutter of laughter ran back through the crowd to be immediately silenced by a shout from the outer fringe.

"Make room up there! Let me through!"

Glancing in the direction of that voice, Bill saw the crowd give way and a frail-bodied oldster wearing a sheriff's five-pointed star push his way into the open space around the roan. The oldster threw up his hands, commanding silence.

"Clear the street!" he shouted.

But at that moment one of the men who had helped free Bill stepped into the stirrup and unpinned a white piece of paper from Bill's shirt front.

"Get this, gents!" he yelled, ignoring the sheriff's command. "It's from that little hellion out at the Circle B. It says, 'This is a sample of what will happen to any more of your hired law dogs riding through High Pass, Tonkin.' It's signed, 'Helen Bond.'"

FOR a long moment dead silence held the crowd. Then a wave of mixed protest and laughter cut loose. Bill Legell, looking down and only half understanding the meaning of the note, saw the sheriff step across and snatch the paper from the man's hand. The lawman's eyes scanned the message and then his gnarled fist crumpled it and threw it at his feet.

His gesture brought more laughs, mostly guarded ones. But one onlooker, standing at the inner edge of the circle, put all caution aside and made no pretense at checking his loud guffaw. He was a middle-aged man, heavily built and with a jowled round face tanned to the color of saddle leather. His outfit was shabby but clean, except for the soiled, floppy-brimmed black Stetson he wore.

"Pack that in your pipe and smoke it, Tonkin!" he called mockingly. Someone behind tried to nudge him and warn him but at that moment he stepped out into the cleared space, his stride so unsteady as to make it at once obvious that he was drunk. He came on toward the sheriff, finally stopping a stride away with feet spread wide to brace his unwieldy

bulk. He raised a hand and wagged a forefinger almost in the sheriff's face.

"This is only the beginnin'!" he crowed. "Wait'll them Bonds finish with the rest of your—"

"Miles, you're drunk!" The lawman's face had gradually turned from beet-red to gray. He had the look of a man wanting to kill, yet hesitating in the face of the mixed emotions of the crowd. "Someone get him and put him to bed."

Evidently Miles had friends, for three men now stepped out and laid hands on him, dragging him away from the sheriff and through the crowd. The drunk had more to say, half-formed, incoherent sentences sprinkled plentifully with profanity. But finally one of the men with him had the good sense to clamp a hand over his mouth and choke off his words.

"Barker! Rabbit!" the sheriff called. "Get out here and give a hand! This stranger's got blood all over his back. The rest of you clear out *pronto!*"

Two men left the circle of onlookers as it widened and scattered, hesitantly obeying the lawman's command. As they sauntered forward to stand at each side of the sheriff and silently regard the breaking up of the crowd, Bill Legell had a good look at them. Each wore a deputy sheriff's badge, yet in the way they wore their guns, and in the cold merciless stare on at least the taller one's face, they boldly proclaimed themselves for what they were—men of the killer breed.

When the street had nearly cleared, this pair turned and helped the sheriff untie Bill's boots from the cinch and lift his stiff frame down out of the saddle. He found that he could stand on his feet—though none too certainly—by spreading his feet and reaching up to take a hold on the saddlehorn. He shook his arms from the grasp of the two deputies.

"Nice welcome your country gives a stranger!" he said shortly. He made no effort to take the edge of sarcasm from his voice.

The sheriff handed him his belts and guns, and Bill buckled them on. "I'm Bruce Tonkin," the lawman announced.

"You're the man I'm lookin' for," Bill said, eying the sheriff coldly. The pounding ache in his head and the searing pain of the wound along his back made it hard to check his temper.

He would have said more, blaming Tonkin for the circumstances that had so nearly cost his life, but then the lawman made a remark that surprised him.

"We've been expectin' you," he said. "Let's have our talk in private."

Without further explaining this puzzling remark, Tonkin turned and led the way obliquely toward the far walk. Bill, more curious than angry now, followed along with the two deputies.

CHAPTER II

LAWMAN'S PROTECTION

TONKIN led the way to his office at one end of the frame courthouse in an open square at the town's center. It was a sparsely furnished room fronting the low-built, thick-walled adobe jail. As soon as the sheriff had lit a lamp on his battered mahogany desk he waved to a chair.

"Have a seat, stranger," he invited. "Strip off your shirt and we'll have a look at that back. Meanwhile, you can tell us what happened."

Some instinct and the few facts

he had learned of Tonkin, warned Bill Legell to keep his identity a secret. Ordinarily, when after a man in unfamiliar territory, he would ask a sheriff's help or at least let him know who he was. But in this case, bearing in mind the things Ed Bond and his sister and the oldster Grubstake had said about Tonkin, he told his story briefly and with no explanation as to his reasons for riding into the country.

Tonkin had a face that was deceiving. Minutes ago on the street, his leathery visage had given him the look of being simply a harassed and angry old man, his brown eyes never quite losing a kind of softness that seemed the sign of patience. But now, in the privacy of his office and in the company of his two silent hard-faced deputies and this stranger, the grizzled face took on the set of granite, and the brown eyes began to glint with a killing light as he listened to the story.

When Bill had finished, the lawman muttered an explosive oath:

"I should have thought of them blockin' that trail and had you come in another way," he growled. "We'll have to warn the others away from the pass."

He turned and spoke crisply to the pair standing behind Legell at the doorway. "Rabbit, you head up there tonight. Stay clear of the canyon but by sunup, be coverin' the pass. Send Holly's men across to the rim and down that old trail past the Longhorn line camp. We can't take any chances. Barker, you can take that roan to the livery barn and turn in. Be ready to ride at sunup."

There was a short silence as Rabbit and Barker went out of the door. The interval gave Bill Legell time to get over his surprise, to let his lean face assume an inscrutability that hid his utter ignorance of what the sheriff was talking about.

"How many more is Holly sendin' in?" Tonkin said with sharp abruptness.

Bill lifted his wide shoulders in a shrug. "How should I know? I told him I could handle it alone, but he had a different idea." He watched Tonkin's eyes widen a bit at the arrogance of his words. "How about gettin' to work on my back?"

The sheriff moved across to help him with an alacrity that showed a new respect. He helped Bill take off his shirt, then went to a locker behind his desk and took out a bottle of iodine and a roll of bandage. Bill winced as the iodine burned into the flesh wound along his back.

"So that little she-cat gave you this, eh?" Tonkin muttered once.

Bill waited until the bandage was on, until he had donned his shirt once more, before he spoke again.

"Now you'd better start at the beginnin' and let me have it all, Tonkin," he said finally. "I want to know who's holdin' cards on this play, and where I wind up if I draw a hand."

Tonkin eased himself onto the corner of his desk, took a sack of tobacco from his pocket, rolled a smoke and then handed the makin's across to Bill.

"There's nothin' much to tell," he said easily. "I've got a warrant out for Ed Bond—the same Ed that you met up-canyon this afternoon. Three weeks ago a gent named Sims was cut down in the alley back here. Him and Ed Bond had had some words over a poker game. It looked all along like Bond had done it, but we didn't get proof until a week ago. One of my deputies, Barker, found Bond's pocket-knife lyin' behind a rain barrel out there near where it happened. At first we only wanted

to ask Bond some questions. When we rode out to his place to ask him to prove where he was the night Sims was killed, he spooked."

"Wouldn't talk?"

"Wouldn't even show himself. It seems he was warned we were comin', why we were comin'. Him and a couple of his crew poked rifles out the bunkhouse window and told us to make tracks. We made 'em. Since then we've tried three different times to arrest him. Once they shot my horse out from under me. So I sent a letter up to Holly at Willow, askin' for a few good men I could deputize to go out and take Bond. That's why you're here."

Bill Legell squinted one eye against the curl of smoke that lifted from the lighted end of his cigarette. That slightly contorted expression of his face and the fact that he hadn't shaved for three days in his hurry to get down here must have stamped his visage with a hardness that fit the part he was playing. For when he drawled, "What else?" the sheriff's expression of puzzlement was obviously put on.

There's nothin' else," Tonkin said. "I want Bond arrested, that's all. We found out later that this Sims was a U. S. deputy marshal. We can't let things—"

"What else?" Bill cut in with a knowing smile.

Tonkin frowned. "I don't get you."

BILL stood up, flipped his still burning cigarette to the floor, not stepping on it to put it out. He hitched his gun belts a little higher about his waist and shrugged.

"Have it your own way," he said. "Only tomorrow mornin' I'm ridin' north again. Holly didn't tell me this was a penny-ante game." He started toward the door.

"Don't be in a hurry," Tonkin said.

Bill turned, leaned back against the wall to one side of the door. "Either get it off your chest or let me get over to the hotel for some sleep."

Tonkin's brown eyes narrowed shrewdly. "You're one of maybe half a dozen Holly's sendin' down here. I can't let you all in on it."

"I told Holly I could swing this alone. I'm tellin' you the same. Holly said you had savvy, now I'm not so sure." Bill let an insulting shade of arrogance edge his tone.

The lawman's tanned visage deepened a shade in color. "You're makin' big talk, stranger. Is it all wind?"

Bill's smile tightened. "The quickest way of tippin' your hand is to bring in a pack of gun-dogs. With only me"—he tapped his chest with a finger of his right hand—"no one will ever be sure exactly what happened."

A shrewd guess lay behind his words, for the sheriff's expression relaxed. He even managed a smile. But then some inner thought seemed to occur to him.

"You weren't such a high and mighty sight when you rode in here," he remarked.

Hardly had he uttered the words before Bill eased his high-built frame away from the wall. Suddenly his two hands came alive in an upward blur. One moment the lawman was looking at a man relaxed, motionless; the next he was staring into the bores of Bill's two Colts. The swiftness of the move, the realization that Bill's two thumbs were hooked on cocked hammers drained the blood from Tonkin's face.

"You'll allow a man one mistake,

won't you, Tonkin?" Bill said softly.

The sheriff let out his breath in a gusty audible sigh. "You'll do," his voice intoned. "Only swing them damn cutters the other way!"

Bill's gesture in arcing down his two weapons and settling them into leather again was as nicely timed as his draw. When his hands hung at his sides once more, Tonkin's glance was filled with unmasked admiration.

"You'll do," the lawman repeated. He thrust out a foot, hooked it over the rung of a chair and drew it toward him.

"Have a seat and listen to something big, friend," he said cordially.

TONKIN took his time about building another smoke. When he lifted his glance from the cigarette and once more regarded Bill Legell there was none of the awe that had touched it a moment ago. He was once more sheriff of Malpais, the lawman who had brought this stranger into the country as a hired gunman.

He ended the long silence by coming directly to the point. "Arrest Ed Bond and deliver him to me and I'll pay you five thousand in gold. Prod him into a shoot-out and pack him in dead and you get ten thousand."

Bill nodded. "All under the protection of the law?" he queried.

For answer, Tonkin reached down between his boots and pulled open a drawer of the desk. His hand fished into the drawer and came out holding a deputy's badge. "Pin this on." He paused, for the first time realizing he didn't know what to call his new deputy. "What's your handle?"

"Call me Legell," Bill answered, a thin smile on his lean face. "It'll do as good as the next." He took the badge, pinned it on the left pocket of his shirt. "And what comes after that—after Bond's out of the way?"

"You slope out of the country. The rest will take care of itself."

Bill's brows came up in a query. "Something that big, eh? Who really cut down this deputy marshal?"

"Ed Bond," Tonkin answered. But the cunning deep in his guileless brown eyes betrayed the fact that he wasn't telling the truth.

Bill had a thought then that prompted him to rise out of his chair, run his left hand gingerly up along his back, and say, "I'll get out and see Bond the first thing in the mornin'. Right now I can stand some sleep."

His instinct was to glance around for his Stetson. Then abruptly he remembered that his hat had been missing when he rode into town.

He saw that Tonkin had read his thought. "Looks like I lost it up the canyon," he remarked regretfully. "It might fit that old gent they call Grubstake."

"Watch out for that jasper," Tonkin advised seriously. "Grubstake has been with the Circle B ever since old man Bond started the brand twenty-five years ago. He likes those kids, Ed and the girl, and he'll fight for 'em. Watch him."

"For ten thousand I'd take on ten like this Grubstake," Bill said, crossing to the door. He paused there. "I'll go out tomorrow—alone."

"You'd better take Barker along."

Bill laughed derisively. "Barker's kind should never give up cow-nursin'," he retorted. "What would I do with him in the way?"

Tonkin had evidently gone to some pains in chosing his deputies, for Bill's pointedly arrogant words now brought a trace of that former

awe into the sheriff's eyes.

"Don't be too sure about Barker," he said, and for his answer had Bill Legell's low chuckle as he went out the door.

Bill went along the street to the livery barn, found his roan stabled there and unlaced his bedroll from his saddle, which had been thrown across the rail at the side of the stall. On the way to the hotel he stopped in at the only store he could find open so late in the evening and paid eleven dollars for a new dark-gray Stetson.

His room at the one-story hotel was at the end of the hall. He drew the blind of the room's single window, after looking out through the raised sash and noting with satisfaction that it fronted on the alley. The shade drawn, he lit the lamp on the washstand and took his time about shaving. When he had finished he put on a clean shirt, blew out the lamp and lay on the bed without taking his clothes off.

HE had been lying there for fifteen minutes, fighting against the sleep that wanted to crowd in on him, when he heard a board creak along the hallway beyond his door. He drew his feet up, took off his boots, and then soundlessly crossed the room to the door, palming the weapon from the holster at his right thigh as he moved.

Standing well to one side of the door, he reached out with his left hand and suddenly twisted the knob and threw the panel open.

Barker stood directly across the dimly lit hallway, his spare tall frame leaning against the opposite partition, a cigarette drooping from the corner of his thin lips. Bill's move was so abrupt that the deputy had no time to straighten from his slouch. But his pale face lost what little color was in it as he stared into the snout of Bill's gun.

"Drag it!" Bill said tersely.

Barker, his face inscrutable, spoke around his cigarette. "You didn't hire this hall."

It was plain that he had been sent by Tonkin to keep a watch on the new deputy. Understanding that immediately, Bill followed his first impulse. His weapon leveled at the killer, he stepped out and across the hall and lifted Barker's twin Colts from holsters.

"Go on home," he ordered, backing out of reach again.

"Go to hell!"

On the heel of Barker's words, Bill moved in. He threw his weapon to his left hand and feinted a blow with his empty right. Barker ducked, raising an arm to shield his head. At that exact instant, while the man's eyes were lowered, Bill brought his six-gun swinging down in a blow that crushed Barker's Stetson crown and landed solidly against the side of his scalp. Barker's knees suddenly gave way and he fell forward, into Bill's arms.

It occurred to Bill that the best place to put the unconscious deputy was in the jail which was almost next door. It was a ticklish job to lug the man out of the hotel and not make too much noise about it, but the town lay under a blanket of sleep so heavy it would have taken more than a few stealthy footsteps to rouse it.

Five minutes later Barker was lying on a cot in one of the jail cells, his keys on the sheriff's desk. If Bill was any judge of the effects of a bull-dogging, the gunman would be unconscious until well into the next day.

Bill was thankful that the livery barn floor was of hard-packed dirt and that his horse was in one of the

Pinned to Legell's shirt was a note which read, "This is what will happen to any law dog who rides through High Pass."

rear stalls. He saddled quietly, led the roan out the back and through the corral and through its gate.

The commissioner had said that Ed Bond ran an outfit that lay north of Malpais, toward the mountains. Bill headed that way, swinging west until he found a trail that struck directly north toward the hills.

He rode hard for better than an hour, alternately running and trotting the roan since he didn't know how much distance he had to cover. At the end of an hour he came to a fork in the trail. One path angled off into the west. Bill took the other.

THE trail lifted him well up into the timber in the next five miles. He was crossing the far side of a grassy pasture, climbing, when suddenly a wink of powder-flame lighted the darkness from the cobalt shadows of the trees directly ahead; and a bullet fanned the air past his shoulder. A moment later the explosion of a rifle racketed down, and on the heel of that sound Bill reined in on the roan and raised his hands high above his head.

"Who is it?" a gruff voice called down.

Bill recognized it as Grubstake's. "Take another look," he yelled. "You know me."

There was a short silence, then the incoherent mutter of Grubstake's voice. Bill clearly heard the levering of the oldster's Winchester but wasn't prepared for what happened next. He was sitting with hands raised, the reins looped about his saddle-horn, when abruptly another shot exploded from the trees.

This time the bullet flicked a shred of cloth from the sleeve of his shirt. He had a moment of panic but didn't move. But he did call loudly, "The commissioner didn't say the Bond crew was a bunch of bushwhackers!"

His stomach muscles crawled as

he awaited his answer. It would probably be a bullet, he was thinking, and while he sat there he cursed inwardly at the trust he had put in this man Grubstake, who had the look of an honest, hard-working old-timer.

Then, after a pause crowded with ominous silence, Grubstake spoke. "What commissioner?"

"The U. S. commissioner at Hodges. I'm his deputy marshal."

"What the hell do you want up here?"

"A talk with Ed Bond."

Grubstake's hollow laugh echoed out of the shadows ahead. "Hunhuh, mister! Not while I'm able to throw my eyes along a sight! You're after Ed and you can save yourself a lot of trouble by ridin' back the way you came."

"You can have my guns."

Grubstake was evidently considering this, for he took a long time answering.

"Ed don't want to talk," he said finally. "Besides, you came in over High Pass. That means you're Tonkin's man. You're lettin' off wind with your talk about the commissioner."

"Did you find my hat up the canyon?" Bill asked, thinking he'd found a way of convincing the oldster.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You'll find my badge pinned into the band of that Stetson."

This time the silence became so prolonged that Bill half wondered if Grubstake had gone back up the trail and was riding for the canyon to prove the truth of his statement.

Then, finally, Grubstake called tersely, "Shed your irons! One forked move will buy you a wooden outfit, brother!"

Bill lowered his hands slowly and deliberately unbuckled his belts and swung them far out to let them fall into the grass alongside the trail. Only then did Grubstake ride out from the impenetrable shadows of the trees. Alongside Bill, he sloped out of the saddle with surprising ease, picked up the guns, and mounted once more.

"Keep straight on up the trail," he said gruffly. "It's two miles and I'll have this smoke-pole lined at your backbone the whole way."

Bill had ridden a good half-mile before either of them spoke. He turned in his saddle and looked back at the oldster. "They've worked a nice frame-up on Bond," he remarked.

Grubstake grunted in what might have been disgust. "You better watch where you're goin'," he retorted, and from there on neither made any further effort to break the monotony of the ride with conversation.

CHAPTER III

ANOTHER STORY

THE Circle B was the kind of a layout Bill Legell would have liked to call his own. The house, built of logs, stood high on the broad shoulder of a hill belted with piñon and an occasional tall cedar. It overlooked a broad grassy valley, one of many that lay inside Circle B fence, Bill was to discover later. A small lake filled the valley's bottom directly out from the house. Deep along one side, almost out of sight of the main building, lay the barns, the bunkhouse, cook-shanty and corrals.

A light showed from one window of the log house. Bill lifted his roan to a trot and headed for it. Once up onto the bench he could see a clean grassy yard inclosed by a white picket fence. He dismounted along-

side the hitch-rail that flanked a white stone walk at the gate.

"Nice place," he remarked.

"Too nice," Grubstake growled, coming out of his saddle without letting the rifle drop out of line with his prisoner. "That's what comes of workin' for a girl."

"I thought Ed Bond ran things up here."

"He does. She runs him." Although the sarcasm was sharp-edged, Bill had the feeling that Grubstake was pretty proud of the looks of the layout and of the fact that he worked for Helen Bond.

"Go on up the walk," Grubstake directed. Bill took the graveled path toward the wide, slant-roofed porch and the oldster followed.

He was approaching the log beam of the single step up onto the porch when Helen Bond's voice spoke out of the shadows along the building's wall.

"Who are you bringing in, Grubstake? I thought we were rid of him."

"Says he's a U. S. deputy marshal. He wanted to see Ed."

Bill could see the girl now, could make out the quick reach of her hand as it went up to her throat in an impulsive gesture of alarm. She was taller than he had guessed she would be, and the erectness of her lithe body aroused an immediate admiration within him.

"Grubstake!" she cried in alarm. "Do you know what you've done?"

"All I know is he sat down there and let me part his hair with two bullets without battin' an eye. Short of luggin' him off dead, I don't think he'd have budged. So I brought him along." Grubstake gave a weary sigh. "This is comin' sooner or later and we'd best have it out now."

Helen Bond stepped out from the shadows at the back of the porch, standing directly in front of Bill Legell and looking down at him.

"One thing you must understand," she said, her voice low-pitched and full of emotion. "We aren't letting you nor anyone else take Ed away. He was framed, and because we know that we'll fight!"

"I've seen Tonkin," Bill announced. "He's offered me five thousand dollars to bring your brother in to him alive, ten thousand if I bring him in dead."

The girl's glance sharpened. Even in the darkness Bill could catch the unwavering intentness of her look. All at once she breathed softly, "You're either a fool or you're the man we've been looking for." She stepped backward to the door behind her, threw it open.

"Come in. Grubstake, hold that gun on him!"

THE room Bill Legell stepped into was low-ceilinged, large, and he at once detected the evidence of a feminine hand in furnishing it. Clean starched curtains hung at the four deep-set windows. Two large bear rugs were spread out before the broad stone fireplace. The sofa that flanked them was deep-cushioned and comfortable-looking. Helen Bond had mellowed the roughness of log beams with the rich coloring of faded old Navajo blankets. Gaming prints hung at each side of the fireplace, and the gun-rack on the front wall was an ornament rather than an ugly fixture.

Bill turned to face the girl just as she held out a hand to Grubstake.

"Get Ed in here," she directed.

The oldster reluctantly handed her his rifle and disappeared through an inner door, which Bill realized, must lead to the bedrooms.

Helen Bond nodded toward a raw-

hide-backed chair alongside the huge slab center table. Bill took the chair, not knowing what to say. Finally he decided that he'd wait until the others were back before he attempted to explain the many things that would need explaining.

Helen Bond sensed his reluctance to talk and crossed to the far side of the table to lay the Winchester out of his reach but well within hers. An unshaded lamp at the table's center gave Bill his first good look at her.

He saw that she had a delicacy of feature and coloring that made her beautiful. While Ed Bond's face had been long, rather sharply chiseled, this girl's was a true oval, gently rounded and with the angles of cheekbone and chin less severe than her brother's. Another thing Bill noticed, as he had that afternoon, was that her deep chestnut hair caught the light and shone like copper.

Having seen the girl, her beauty, and understanding from the looks of this house just what she and her brother had built here and might lose, Bill Legell had a momentary feeling of mixed regret and helplessness. Then he realized that he had already promised himself to do all he could to save Ed Bond. The man wasn't a killer, wasn't guilty of the charge that had brought Bill down here.

When Grubstake's boots finally pounded in the corridor beyond the closed door, a lighter tread blending in with them, Bill could see that the girl felt a measure of the same relief that came to him. The wait had been long and embarrassing.

Ed Bond was first through the doorway. His hair, lighter than his sister's, was uncombed, his keen blue eyes slightly narrow-lidded and heavy with sleep. But his first words were crisp and betrayed his look. They showed too that Grubstake must have done some talking during his absence.

"Let's have it, straight from the shoulder, stranger," he said without preamble.

Bill used a good bit of patience in telling his story. He began with his last interview with the commissioner and ended with the telling of how he had locked Barker in the jail and started out blind for the Circle B.

When he told of riding into Malpais that night, of the mixed reactions of the crowd as they had heard the note read aloud, Ed Bond's face lit up.

"We have a few friends left," he muttered.

"One, at least," Bill said. "A man by the name of Miles stood up to your sheriff and had a thing or two to say."

"Lew Miles was drunk," Grubstake growled. "Otherwise he'd have kept his mouth shut. Go on with the rest."

WHEN Bill Legell had finished, he fished into shirt pocket and took out tobacco and offered the makin's first to Ed and then to Grubstake. Both answered with a shake of the head—to Bill an ominous sign. So he had to be conent to build himself a cigarette and sit there smoking while the silence dragged out, waiting for their verdict.

At length, Ed Bond snapped out, "All right, supposin' all this is true! What'll you do with me?"

"Use my own judgment in carrying out orders," Bill told him.

"Meanin' what?"

"That this is a different law, not Tonkin's. Where were you the night Fred Sims was killed?"

"Here. Sis was away on a visit to relatives. Grubstake and me had

the place to ourselves. The crew was in town spendin' their pay. We turned in early and were in the saddle before sunup next mornin'."

"How about the clasp-knife Tonkin found near the place Sims was cut down?"

Ed Bond's thin lips twisted in a wry grimace. "Rabbit Bude did that. I'd fired him that same mornin' and missed the knife later in the day. Outside of bein' lazy and not worth his pay, Rabbit always picked up anything he took a fancy to, like a pair of spurs, a bottle of whiskey or a fine horsehair bridle. Once it was a derringer with a busted hammer."

"We could talk from now until sunup," Helen Bond put in. "What we want to know is where you stand, Legell."

Bill spoke to Ed Bond rather than to the girl: "As far as I'm concerned, the law doesn't want you, Bond. I'll make that report to the commissioner."

"Then you're heading back for Hodges?" Helen Bond said.

Bill shook his head slowly. "Not until I've found Fred Sims' killer. Fred was a friend of mine."

"And who the hell knows who cut him down?" Grubstake's voice boomed.

Bill lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "No one—yet. I think I'll go on a few days as one of Tonkin's law dogs. There's a thing or two about that man I don't understand."

"He's poison," Grubstake growled.

"It might help if you told me what you know about Tonkin," Bill said. "Why is it that he'll personally pay a reward for Ed, here, to be brought in to him, preferably dead?"

On the heel of that question he caught the looks that flashed between these three. They were looks of some unspoken understanding, and served to put him outside their confidence as surely as though they had bluntly told him that what he was asking was none of his business.

A slow irritation mounted within him. It made him rise to his feet, say tersely, "Empty my guns and hand 'em over and I'll be on my way."

The finality of his words widened the girl's eyes. As she looked at him, understanding that he was willingly leaving without trying to force them to tell what they knew, a flush of embarrassment swept across her face. She shot one pleading look at her brother.

"Ed, we have to trust someone!" she said impulsively.

"Don't be fools!" Grubstake warned.

But Ed Bond raised a hand, gesturing the oldster to silence. Then he looked squarely at Bill Legell.

"It's taken a little time to work off the spookin' you gave us this afternoon," he drawled. "Sit down, Legell, and we'll tell you what we know."

GRUBSTAKE was evidently a person to be reckoned with, for before Ed Bond started talking he made an excuse to send the oldster out of the room.

"There's some coffee out in the kitchen," he said. "Grubstake, you go out and light a fire under it."

After Grubstake had gone, slamming the hall door with a solid bang as evidence of his displeasure, Ed sat down in the chair opposite Bill.

"Dad died two years ago," he began quietly. "We never were quite sure how he died. It was on a day he and a geologist from the coast were looking over a fault along the foot of the rim north of here. He'd brought in that geologist on the hunch that he had found a gold-and-

silver-bearing outcropping along the ledge of a dry wash."

"He prospected in this country once," Helen explained. "He was sure he'd found something."

"The geologist—his name was Cribbins, as I remember it—packed dad home that night roped across his own saddle." Perspiration stood out on Ed Bond's forehead as he continued, "Dad was dead. Cribbins claimed that the ledge trail had let down under him, dropped him into the wash shortly after they'd started home with some ore samples. We went up there and it looked like that was what happened. But the strange thing is that the ledge as it fell buried the outcropping that had given the samples. And another thing that's never tied in right was that Bruce Tonkin was here at the layout lookin' for dad that day. We told him where to go and he came back later and said he hadn't been able to find him."

A short silence followed. "You think Tonkin and this Cribbins might have murdered your father?" Bill asked finally.

Ed Bond shrugged. "We aren't sure. But we do know that Cribbins had been seen talking to Tonkin in town the day before he came out here."

"What about the samples?" Bill queried.

"Cribbins stayed in town long enough to work them through at the assay office," the girl answered. "They showed nothing but a little lead. It was mostly fool's gold, iron pyrite."

"So you gave up the idea of following your father's hunch?"

"Wouldn't you?" Ed asked. "It's the spot where he was killed. I wouldn't like to work up there."

"Tonkin might have been in with Cribbins," said Bill. "But if he was, he'd have done something since then to finish what he started."

"We think he has," Ed said.

Just then Grubstake came into the room, a steaming pot of coffee in one hand, four china cups dangling from the fingers of the other.

"So you told it all, eh?" the oldster queried, eying Ed sourly.

Ed nodded. "Dad had a mortgage on the place," he continued. "I haven't been able to lift it, even though it's for only five thousand. But I've kept up the interest, and it's a good investment for the bank. But since I was framed with this Sims' killing, the bank's called the note. I'm not considered a good risk any longer."

"That's natural," Bill agreed. "But once you're clear your note will be renewed."

"If I'm cleared! Another thing is that Tonkin is Boyd Smith's brother-in-law. Smith is president of the bank. His money has elected Tonkin the last two terms."

"Forked?" Bill asked.

"No, just close," Grubstake put in dryly. "Maybe if you was dyin' of thirst he'd give you one swallow of water—if he wasn't thirsty himself."

Bill lifted a spoonful of sugar into the steaming cup of coffee Grubstake set before him. As he stirred the hot liquid the others were silent, obviously waiting for his reaction. It was plain, too, that they had told him all they knew of the elements that had involved Ed Bond in this breach of the law.

"The whole thing will take some thinkin' out," he said finally, "I'll go back and be on hand tomorrow to start things with Tonkin. I may even ride out here and make a fake try at corrallin' you, Ed."

"Come alone, or damned if I won't have to shoot one of Tonkin's

skunks!" Grubstake shot out. "We aren't goin' to let Ed set foot off this place until this thing's settled."

"Maybe you ought to take to the hills and hide out until it's over," Bill suggested.

Ed shook his head, his face taking on a slow flush that showed the quick temper in him. "This is all guesswork. Maybe you can help, maybe you can't. The minute I leave here Tonkin will be serving foreclosure papers. He tried it once last week and we drove him off. That's why he's bringing in his gunnies. Once he throws a crew in here I'll grow gray hair before he moves 'em out." He shook his head again, this time with more conviction. "I won't run!"

There was more talk, most of it Bill's questioning to clear a few minor points. He left the Circle B ten minutes short of midnight. He wore his own guns out of the house, loaded, and by that time even Grubstake had lost his surliness and suspicion and was civil enough as he wished him a good night.

It was ten miles back to Malpais. On a good part of the ride Bill Legell found it hard to put thought of Helen Bond from his mind. Even as he took to his blankets in his hotel room an hour and a half later, the clear image of the girl was still with him.

CHAPTER IV

UNDER ARREST

BRUCE TONKIN'S wife answered the persistent knocking at the door at three that morning. She let Rabbit Bude in the door, woke her husband and went back to bed.

Rabbit waited in the living-room until the bedroom door was closed, and the sheriff in his night-shirt had finished a long yawn and turned down the smoking wick of the lamp. Then he took his hand from behind him and threw a soiled gray Stetson onto the table.

Tonkin frowned, obviously irritable at being wakened at this hour. "What the hell is it?"

"Look," Rabbit said. He was a man of few words but now his shifty eyes held an amused glint.

"I'm lookin', ain't I?" Tonkin picked up the hat, thumbed its brim a moment and tossed it back to the table. "Quit stallin'!"

"Take a look inside the band."

Tonkin took the hat in his two hands once more, turned it bottom-side up and thumbed down the sweat-band. Halfway through with his job his forefinger encountered a hard object that reflected the lamplight as it was turned into sight.

"Deputy U. S. marshal, huh?" Tonkin grunted. "Well, I've seen one before!"

"It was layin' up there in the canyon where this stranger tangled with the Bond crowd this afternoon."

Tonkin reached out and clutched Rabbit's arm in a grip that made the other wince. "Say that again! I thought I told you to keep clear of that canyon on your way to the pass."

Rabbit reached down and removed the lawman's fingers from his arm, rubbing the spot gingerly.

"That's gratitude!" he complained. "Bring in something like this and you give me hell for not ridin' eight miles farther on a circle. Them Bonds aren't nothin' to be afraid of. Hell, I worked—"

"Get on with it! You didn't follow orders, but we'll let that go. How do you know this is Legell's hat?"

"There was sign. Four horses, as well as I could read it in the dark by the light of a match. Alongside

the hat there was somethin' that was brown and looked like blood. This stranger had blood all over his shirt, I remembered, and—"

Tonkin didn't wait for more. He disappeared through his bedroom door, leaving Rabbit with his sentence unfinished. He was back in less than two minutes, fully dressed, buckling on his gun belt.

On the way to the front door, he said, "Come along, I'll need you," and from there on along the street toward the hotel—until they were in front of the courthouse—he had nothing more to say.

But in front of the courthouse he stopped so abruptly that Rabbit, two steps behind, walked into him.

"We'll go to the office and get that sawed-off shotgun," Tonkin said. "I saw Legell make a draw tonight. He's fast enough to cut down all three of us before we could get the drop on him."

"Three?" Rabbit echoed.

"Barker's watchin' his room in the hotel." Tonkin swung along the walk that led to the jail at the far end of the courthouse.

He took out his keys, inserted one in the lock and twisted it to the left. It didn't throw the lock. He tried the knob and the door swung open under the pressure of his hand. Some inner wariness made him stand back as the panel swung out from him. He reached down and lifted his gun from holster.

"You first," he said to his deputy. Rabbit hesitated, not understanding, and the sheriff reached back and took a hold on his arm and shoved him inside. When nothing but silence greeted the tread of Rabbit's boots, Tonkin called, "Light the lamp."

Rabbit was getting suspicious. "Hunh-*uh!*" he said positively. "I'll cover you while you light it!"

TONKIN, already fairly certain that no danger threatened him from inside, stepped gingerly across the room, struck a match and touched it to the lamp's wick. As the light steadied to a bright glare, he looked toward the cell door. He went over there, found it locked. But still curious, he unlocked it and went inside, the lamp in his hand.

His yell brought Rabbit into the cell block, six-gun cocked. Together they worked over the still unconscious Barker. Rabbit ran out to the watering trough in front of the courthouse and returned with a canful of cold water. He tossed it full in Barker's face. The wounded deputy opened his eyes.

It was five minutes before he could talk. He didn't remember anything after the instant he had ducked to avoid Legell's fist in the hotel hallway.

"We'll go corral him right now—if he's there," Tonkin said, as he finished cursing Barker for his carelessness. "Rabbit, you cover the alley. Take a shotgun. Barker, you and me'll go to the room. If he bats an eye, let him have it. You know what this means?"

Rabbit shook his head, Barker looked up from where he sat on the cot, his forehead creased in pain at the throbbing in his head.

"It means that I've told this gent enough so that he can guess the rest if he ever gets to see Ed Bond. It means I'm through here, and you two along with me. If he's in his room, we're safe. If he isn't there, we'd better be headin' for the border." Tonkin turned, led the way out, leaving both cell and office doors open behind him.

Tonkin and Barker crossed the hotel lobby without waking the clerk sleeping behind the counter up

front. They had waited a few minutes to give Rabbit enough time to get back into the alley. It was Tonkin who tried the door to the room Barker indicated. The door was locked. With a meaning nod of his head, Tonkin stepped back and raised a booted foot and kicked the door in. Barker, remembering the humiliation of having his guns taken away, didn't hesitate in stepping through as the door crashed open, his cocked shotgun halfway to his shoulder.

Bill Legell sat up in his bed, clearly outlined by the light that washed in from the hallway. It took him only a second to realize what was happening, to raise his hands.

"Back again?" he said to Barker.

Tonkin reached around Barker and pushed down the upswinging barrels of the shotgun. Then, reaching into his pocket, he drew out Bill's badge and tossed it across onto the blankets.

"So Holly sent you down ahead of the others, did he?" he queried mockingly.

Bill picked up his badge and knew that nothing he could say would change the fact that the sheriff was now sure of his identity.

Tonkin, too, seemed to understand that talk wouldn't count now. "We'll give you half a minute to get into your pants and shirt, friend," he said flatly.

As he swung his feet over the edge of the bed and began pulling on his clothes, Bill Legell dismissed any idea of reaching for the guns that hung from the bedpost.

TEN minutes later he was standing inside the cell where he had placed Barker's unconscious form a few hours before. Tonkin, outside in the corridor, was standing with hands on hips, eying him soberly.

"It'll take some thinkin' to work this town up into a lynchin'," he said, "but me and Barker and Rabbit can do it. And, brother, you won't have a chance! You won't get to talk to a lawyer, you won't even get to stand trial. By this time tomorrow night you'll be stretchin' a new rope from the low branch of that cottonwood in the courthouse square."

"You make big tracks for such a little squirt!" Bill said, trying to disguise his feeling of helplessness behind a show of arrogance.

Tonkin ignored him. "The only thing I'm not sure of is what happened tonight after you slugged Barker," he muttered. "Think I'll go down to the stables and have a look at your horse."

"He's drippin' wet," Bill told him, glad that he had thought to rub down the animal with a blanket at the end of his ride.

"You could have got out to the Circle B and back again," Tonkin mused. "If you've seen Ed Bond, it may make things a little tougher to swing."

"I saw all three of 'em," Bill told him blandly. "They invited me in and we had a cup of coffee."

Tonkin laughed raucously. "I was forgettin' the combin' over they gave you yesterday afternoon." His confidence was visibly returning. "Guess I'm spooked over nothin'. Just why did you belt Barker alongside the head with your cutter?"

"So I could ride out to see Ed Bond." Bill's smile was inscrutable.

Tonkin laughed once more, turned and went to the cell-black door.

"I'll bet you're wishin' you'd thought to do it!" was his parting shot.

CHAPTER V

LYNCH TALK

HELEN BOND slept less than two hours that night, closing her eyes only as the first gray light of the false dawn relieved the darkness at her bedroom window.

The feeling of utter helplessness that had kept her awake most of the night had its way with her even after she answered the clanging call of the cook's gong from the bunkhouse at sunup. She wasn't putting much faith in this stranger Legell, simply because she knew Bruce Tonkin so well.

She was as silent as Ed and Grubstake as they ate their breakfast. Afterward, gripped by a nervousness that she couldn't conceal, she walked to the corrals and told one of the crew to catch up her team of bays and hitch the buckboard.

"You can't go outside our fence without runnin' a chance," Grubstake complained bitterly. "Stay here, Miss Helen!"

"And sit and wait?" she flared hotly. "For what?"

Neither Ed nor Grubstake made any further attempt to check her willfulness. She drove out the trail, intending to take the west fork for a long hard drive along the foot of the rim. But at the forks, a sudden decision made her keep straight on toward town.

Lew Miles' place lay two miles north of Malpais, a half mile off the trail. She swung in at Miles' gate without slackening the speed of the team, and when she drew rein in the hard-packed yard under the locust trees Miles was already on his way down from the house.

"Some day you'll kill yourself drivin' like that," he said, reprovingly, as he took her arm and helped her from the seat.

He was a milder man than Bill Legell had seen last night. His kindly brown eyes were bloodshot and his hands shook a little, the only remaining evidence of one of his rare bouts with the whiskey bottle. Everyone in Malpais knew Lew Miles' shortcoming and accepted it with the stoicism even his wife showed. Except when drunk and in jail—where he wound up every time—Lew Miles was a righteous and law-abiding citizen.

"I suppose you heard about it," were his first words as he and Helen walked up toward the house.

"Yes. You've been drinking again."

"Not that," Miles said impatiently. "Early this mornin' the stage was stopped three miles out the east road. Old Clem Wallis was cut to doll rags, without even gettin' the chance to drop his ribbons and go for his gun. There was less than five hundred dollars in the boot, an' all of it was gone when the sheriff got there. Him and his two deputies took out on the sign and in less'n two hours was back with the gent that done it. They're makin' lynch talk in town right now. Clem Wallis was a right fine man."

As the oldster spoke, Helen Bond felt a tightening at her throat. A grim conviction grew within her.

"The prisoner!" she said quickly. "Have you seen him?"

Miles shook his head. "No one has. Tonkin's got the jail under guard. His name is Legell. He may have friends and Tonkin ain't takin' chances."

It was all Helen could do to make the thoughts that raced wildly through her mind take on some pattern. At first she was frantic. Finally she gave up trying to guess

what had happened to put Legell in Tonkin's jail. All that mattered now was that he would die along with Ed and Grubstake, and perhaps, herself.

"Miles, you must listen to me!" she said suddenly. "You're the one friend we're sure of, the one man who can do this!"

She talked on and only twice did Lew Miles interrupt her. Once to ask incredulously: "You mean I'm to throw the whiskey away?" and again to say: "Hell, no, they never search me."

BY ten o'clock that morning nearly everyone within a radius of twenty miles of Malpais knew that two very important things had happened.

First Clem Wallis, for seventeen years driver of the Willow-Malpais stage, had been brutally murdered by a killer named Legell who was now under guard in Bruce Tonkin's jail.

Second, and perhaps more remarkable, was the rumor that Barker, Tonkin's new deputy, had struck it rich on some gold mining stock he'd picked up for a song. The remarkable thing about it was that Barker was buying free drinks for anyone who'd take the trouble to drop in at Abel Deems' saloon, the Silver Dollar.

Deems himself questioned the truthfulness of Barker's story of his gold mining stock. But Barker had laid two hundred dollars on Deems' counter at eight o'clock that morning, enough to buy thirteen cases of whiskey. Deems, not seeing that kind of money every day, kept his doubts to himself and pocketed the money.

Barker and Tonkin were the only two who knew that the two hundred was Tonkin's money and that the gold mining stock was nothing but Tonkin's brain-child.

By mid-afternoon the town was crowded, the thirteen cases nearly gone and better than half of Malpais' citizens well on the way to being drunk. Barker bought ten more cases and set up a bar in the hotel lobby. At five, when Tonkin openly expressed some alarm over the safety of his prisoner and sent Barker and Rabbit Bude down to guard the jail, the elements for a lynching were already shaping.

And by five o'clock, half the town knew that Lew Miles was on another tear. But Lew Miles was the only one who knew that for the first time in his life he'd gotten drunk on only one glass of whiskey. He'd overstepped Helen Bond's strict order by that much, that one glass, before he carried the almost full quart bottle he'd bought with her money back into the alley to cache it inside an empty ash can.

At six Miles joined the small crowd gathering around the courthouse. He had timed his arrival nicely. The crowd was boisterous, not ugly yet. The drunks were still having a good time, the more sober not yet worked up to such a pitch that they would make a try for the jail, which Bruce Tonkin pretended to be guarding, having stationed his two deputies front and back, each with a loaded shotgun.

Lew had wondered about this next part. Finally he decided to get it over with as quickly as possible. He hadn't carried a gun for years, but today he wore a holster at his thigh, weighed down by the Frontier Model Colt .45 he'd bought twenty-two years ago. As he lurched into the crowd fronting the jail door, purposely weaving on unsteady legs, he let out a shrill whoop and drew his gun and emptied it barely over the

heads of Barker and Rabbit, his bullets kicking adobe dust down onto the crowns of their Stetsons.

A few thought it was funny, and laughed. Others thought it wasn't funny—Rabbit and Barker among them—and growled warnings to Miles. He was standing there, reloading the old .45, when a man stepped in behind him, laid a rough hold on his arm, and reached around with his other hand to yank the weapon from his grasp.

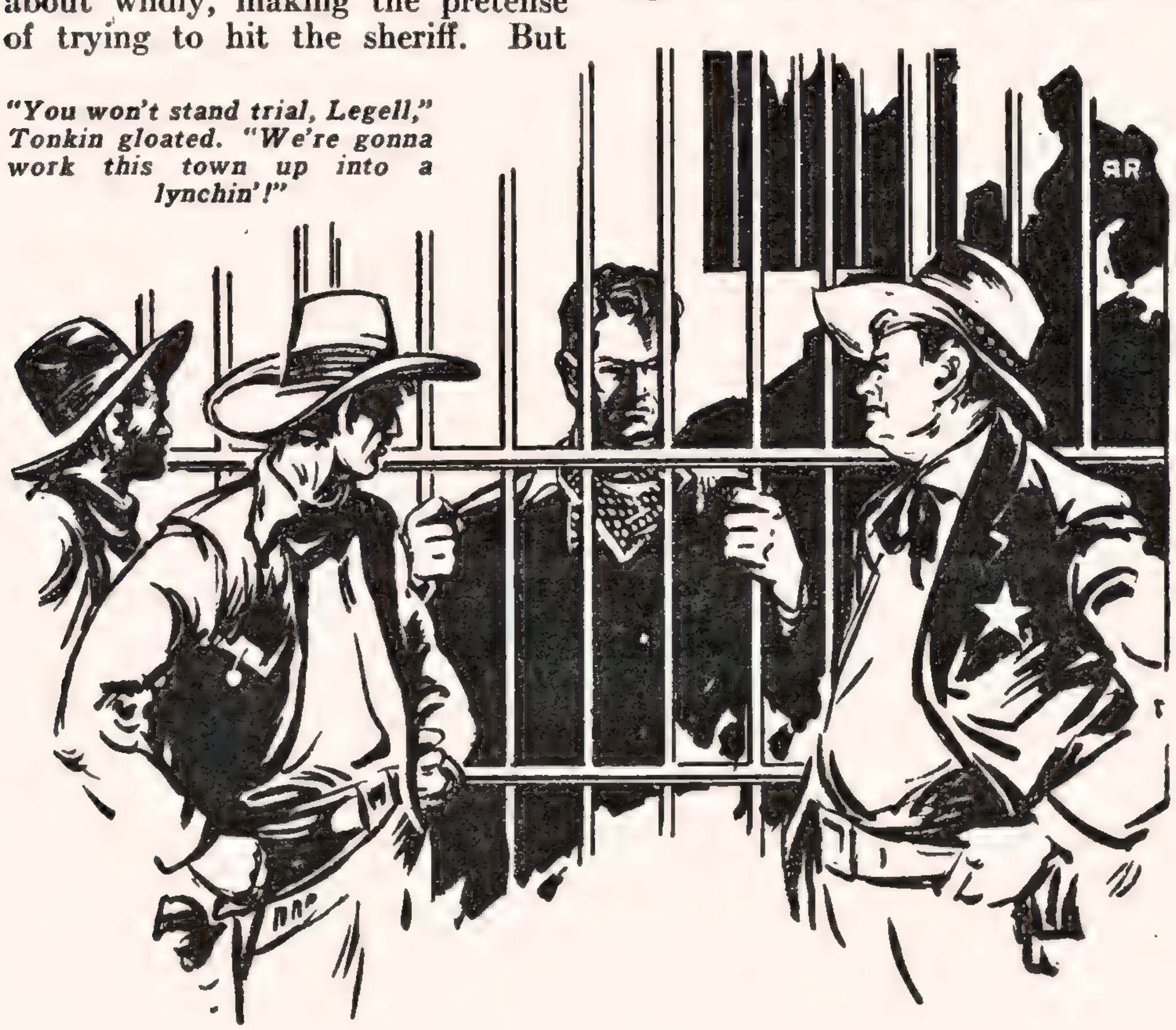
It was Bruce Tonkin. "We'll have no more of that!" he growled, pushing Miles in through the crowd toward his office door. "You would pick a day like this to go on one of your sprees! We'll put you in here to cool off a little!"

Miles protested, swinging his arms about wildly, making the pretense of trying to hit the sheriff. But Tonkin, long trained in Miles' ways, took a firm hold on his prisoner's left ear, twisted it, and grunted, "Be good!"

"Let go!" Miles screamed. "Let go, damn it! You always catch me by that sore ear!"

This brought the best laugh from the crowd. Almost everyone there knew about Lew Miles' sore ear, about the time he'd been caught with a broken leg at a hill line-camp in the dead of winter and had that ear nearly frozen off before he could crawl out to gather wood for a fire. The ear had been tender ever since. It was the only vulnerable part of his anatomy.

Opening the inner steel door of the jail, Tonkin pushed Miles in. "You ought to have more sense than to



"You won't stand trial, Legell," Tonkin gloated. "We're gonna work this town up into a lynchin'!"

tote a cutter, Lew," he said roughly. "You might hurt yourself."

He put Miles in the cell opposite that of the jail's only other prisoner, and shot the bolt in the lock.

"I'll have your supper sent up right away," he said. "Eat it and go to sleep."

Tonkin had done this at least twenty times in his five years as sheriff. The hot supper he brought over from the chink's was a courtesy he rarely showed other prisoners. But Lew Miles wasn't exactly like any of his other prisoners.

AS soon as the outer door was closed and bolted once more, Miles got up off his cot and came to the steel-barred door of his cell. "Legell!" he called.

Bill Legell, thinking his hearing had deceived him, paid no attention.

"Legell, I got something for you," Miles called again.

This time Bill got up off his cot and came to the door of his cell. He took a close look across the half-lighted corridor, saw who it was.

"So it's you," he said. "You're sure on a stiff one this time."

Sober, Lew Miles was always offended at having his weakness called to his attention.

"I ain't drunk," he protested. "I'm doin' this for Helen Bond." He rubbed his sore ear gingerly. "You get ornery and I won't give you this!"

"Give me what?"

Miles' round loose face took on a cunning smile. He bent over, pulled up the leg of his baggy trousers until the cuff was above the knee. Against the white flesh of his fat thigh lay the blue steel barrel of a six-gun.

"This," he said, as he reached in under his pants leg to undo the knot of the rawhide thong that bound the weapon to his thigh. "Damned if this didn't about put my leg asleep. I tied it on too tight!"

He finally pulled the weapon loose, reached it through the bars and slid it across the stone floor until it hit with a clatter against the base of Bill's cell door.

"Helen sent that," he explained, as Bill reached through to pick up the weapon. "Here's a handful of shells." He proved beyond doubt his soberness for the next two minutes, tossing a dozen .45 shells accurately across toward the opposite cell so that Bill had little difficulty in retrieving them all.

"You're to wait until dark and make your try," Miles said. "Helen wanted me to tell you that her and Ed and Grubstake will be watchin' the door to the sheriff's office. If you get that far, they'll have guns to cover you from the courthouse roof."

"They can't run that chance!"

Miles chuckled. "You don't know that girl. She's got more spunk than a pack mule." Then, seeing that Bill still frowned, he added: "It oughn't to be so hard. With all this whiskey workin' into the crowd, Ed and Grubstake can get away."

IT was dark at seven-thirty. Not on the street, however, for tonight more store lights were burning than on any Saturday night within the memory of Malpais' oldest citizen. But at least the courthouse square was in semi-shadow, a fact which was encouraging to Bruce Tonkin as he left the end of the street's plank walk and started across the courtyard.

Today, three of Holly's men had come in through the pass and were now mixing in with the crowd thick-

ening in front of the jail. Tonkin had only to give his signal—which was to take off his hat and scratch his head—and those three would start things.

Tonkin intended to be near his office door, although not too near it, and to put up a fight to keep the crowd back. Holly's three men were to take his guns away and clear the way for the mob. Tomorrow the town would remember that Malpais' sheriff had tried to do his duty and stop a lynching.

As he approached the loose outer fringes of the crowd and looked over the heads in front of him, he was surprised to see that Barker no longer stood by his office door. Rabbit was out back, guarding the rear. The door, too, was standing open, a fact which made the sheriff hurry as he pushed his way through and up the steps into his office.

The heavy steel door to the jail was standing open and a light was shining into the office from the cellblock.

"Barker!" Tonkin called.

A five-second silence greeted his words, sent his hand crawling up toward the butt of the weapon at his thigh. But finally Barker's voice called from beyond the door: "In here, boss."

Tonkin breathed a sigh of relief. He crossed the room and stepped through the door. But there he stopped, too stunned to move farther. Bill Legell stood in the narrow corridor between the four cells, two six-guns in his hands, one pointed through his open cell door at Barker, who lay on the cot bound with torn strips from the blankets. The other was centered in line with the sheriff's belt buckle.

Barker was in his underwear. Bill Legell wore the deputy's trousers, shirt and hat, the latter a trifle small for him.

"Come in, sheriff," he drawled. "We've been waitin' for you."

When Tonkin hesitated, Bill jerked his weapon a bare inch to emphasize his command. "You're to go in there and gag Barker. Stuff a piece of that blanket in his mouth and wrap another around and tie it. First, maybe you'd better step over and let me take the weight off your holsters."

So much happened in the next thirty seconds that the lawman had little time to think of a possible way out of this. He was relieved of his guns and he gagged Barker so tightly under the threat of Legell's gun that the upper half of the killer's face turned a dark red. He was acutely aware of Lew Miles' snoring in the cell across the corridor the whole time.

"Miles did it, eh?" he queried with sudden insight.

"Miles? Who's Miles?" Bill Legell asked blandly. Then: "Oh, the old gent across there?" He laughed, shook his head. "Guess again. I had this gun strapped to the inside of my leg when you locked me in here this mornin'."

It sounded convincing, as Bill had hoped it would, and Tonkin immediately forgot Lew Miles.

"Now what?" the sheriff asked, undisturbed, for he was thinking that the crowd out front would soon sense that something was wrong.

For answer, Bill Legell calmly shucked the shells from the cylinders of Tonkin's two .45s. He handed the guns back to him.

"We're goin' to walk out of here, side by side, and pay a little call on your brother-in-law," he said coolly.

He was watching the sheriff closely, saw the quick way the pale blue eyes took on a hard light before

their look became carefully blank. Then Tonkin smiled.

"I'll lay you a hundred to one you don't make it across the courtyard alive," he said.

Bill shrugged. "If I don't, you don't."

Bill's words lightened Tonkin's coloring a shade. Perhaps he remembered the swift draw he had witnessed in his office the night before.

"We'll be on our way," Bill said. "You'll keep on my left side, even with me. Walk right along but don't hurry."

The men in the front ranks of the crowd, less than twenty feet from the steps into Tonkin's office, were the least sober of all. They were the only ones who had a close look at Bill Legell through the semidarkness before he stepped down and was swallowed by the crowd. Tonkin and Barker had gone in and out of the jail many times in these last few hours. Now Tonkin's appearance caused little comment. If anyone noted that his deputy had grown a good four inches in the last ten minutes it wasn't mentioned.

Once Tonkin's right hand came up to touch the brim of his Stetson. He was about to lift it off his head and give his signal to the three men waiting in the crowd.

"Put that hand down!" Bill said quickly, not because he understood the gesture but because Tonkin's hand, upraised, might have whipped in a blow alongside his head.

Tonkin sobered as he realized that he had failed, that his guess had been wrong. Someone at the front of the crowd called, "How about givin' it a try now, boys!" and took the attention of the crowd, which pressed forward a little, although still lacking the impetus to carry out the suggestion.

THEY were clear of the courthouse square and had taken to the plank walk when the first shot at the jail cut loose.

"Faster!" Bill ordered, as they went along the walk.

Bruce Tonkin thought of many ways to make his break on the short walk to Boyd Smith's house. He dismissed them all, finding his encouragement at the mounting roar of the crowd back at the jail. Soon Barker would be discovered. Soon they'd start hunting for him as men remembered the too tall deputy who had left the jail with him minutes ago.

Tonkin smiled to himself as he turned in at the gate to Boyd Smith's huge white frame house. He could stall this off long enough to give Barker a chance to come after him.

His knock at the door was answered immediately. Boyd Smith himself opened the door. He was a short, paunchy man with a shiny bald head who stared up at them through spectacles poised midway down his fat nose.

"Oh, you, eh," he grunted. "Come in."

Bill Legell let the door close behind him before he palmed up a .45. "We've got some business with you, Smith. Where can we talk—alone?"

Boyd Smith's face went pale as parchment. He swallowed thickly. "The library," he gulped and led the way out of the high-ceilinged hallway and into a room to the left of it, a carpeted room, with two windows heavily draped, containing an upright piano, a polished walnut desk, two comfortable leather chairs alongside a horsehair sofa, and shelves well filled with books, mostly in sets. A lamp burned on the table in the room's center.

Bill closed the door, leaned back

against it. "This won't take long, Smith," he said. "I'm a United States deputy marshal. I'm here to arrest whichever one of you is guilty of having paid a man by the name of Cribbins to murder Ed Bond's father."

CHAPTER VI

RATS RUN TO COVER

THE accusation came so suddenly, so flatly, that Boyd Smith's head whipped up and guilt was mirrored plainly on his face.

"Not me!" he breathed, his voice more than a whisper. "I had nothing to do with that!"

"Then your part was to foreclose the Bond mortgage, to get the ranch. How soon were you going to start taking out that gold?"

"Gold?" Smith was incredulous. He shot an angry look at Tonkin. "You told me it was lead, not—" He didn't catch himself until the words were out.

Bruce Tonkin smiled thinly, his hands busy with a cigarette. He was sitting on Smith's desk and now he ignored the six-gun in Bill Legell's hand.

"Go ahead, Boyd," he said acidly. "Tell him the whole business. He won't be alive an hour from now, ten minutes from now." His words all too clearly emphasized a muted throaty wave of sound coming from far down along the street. The mob was on the loose.

Bill was well aware that the crowd must be moving out of the courtyard and down the street by this time, probably with Barker leading it.

"Talk, Smith," he said tersely. "It may save you a few years at Yuma."

Boyd Smith, hands shaking and his bald head glistening with perspiration, looked angrily at Tonkin. "He's done this!" he said bitterly. "It was him that paid Cribbins to give a false report on assaying that ore of Bond's. I don't know how old Bond was killed—but I can guess. Cribbins wasn't the man to do it."

Tonkin laughed, leaning over to pull open a drawer of the desk and take out a match with which he lit his cigarette. "Cribbins didn't do it," he admitted brazenly. "I took care of that. Bond's skull was crushed before he even started his fall."

"Go on," Bill said. "Tell the rest. You killed Sims?"

Tonkin nodded. A few shouts came from almost directly in front of the house. Tonkin reached down, as though to push shut the drawer, his gesture deceptively casual.

"Sure I got Sims. After that row over the cards, him and Ed Bond got real friendly. I had a hunch Ed had told Sims a little too much. It was easy. Sims didn't even know when the bullet cut him down."

Suddenly his hand whipped up out of the drawer, holding, tight-fisted, a double barrel derringer. At the same time he pushed himself sideways off the desk.

Bill Legell's six-gun was hanging at his side. He had suspected Tonkin's first move toward the drawer, but not the second. In the split second it took him to raise and line his .45, Tonkin's weapon blasted smoke and flame. Along Bill's right arm ran a flood of pain. His grasp loosened against all his effort to tighten it, and the next instant the heavy .45 dropped to the floor.

He moved by instinct, lunging toward the desk, not minding that the lawman dodged out of the way. His fist swept the chimney and shade off the lamp, wiped out the flame so

that the room was plunged into darkness at the exact instant Tonkin picked up the fallen six-gun. Bill's lunge carried him on past the desk and he crouched behind it barely in time.

Smith, until now too frightened to find his voice, spoke from far across the room, in back of Bill. "Bruce, you'll pay for this!"

"I've got your iron, Legell!" Tonkin's voice sounded from the direction of the doors.

Bill's shirt sleeve was soggy wet now and sticking to his numbed arm. He could feel the blood running down onto his right hand, dripping off the end of his fingers. But with his left he drew his other weapon, cocked it.

ABRUPTLY, from the hallway, came a pounding on the front door. Then the tread of many boots sounded along the porch.

"In here, Barker!" Tonkin called.

The lock on the door rattled, someone kicked at the solid paneling, and Bill knew that only seconds remained before the mob would break in.

He moved slightly, to make himself more comfortable. His elbow touched a bit of metal, hard and cool. He felt of it, recognizing it as a metal scrap basket. An idea prompted him to lay his weapon on the carpet and pick up the basket.

"Tonkin!" he called. As he spoke, he came to his feet and hurled the basket through the darkness in the direction of the room's door where the sheriff crouched. Leaning down as the missile left his hand, Bill snatched up his weapon again.

Its hollow crash against the door set up a racket of sound. It must have fallen directly down upon Tonkin, taken him by surprise. Far above the bang of it as it hit the floor Bill clearly heard the lawman's startled grunt. Then he saw the thing he had hoped he'd see.

Along the dark outline of the sill of the front window closest to the door, Bill saw a moving shape. He lined his gun below it and pulled the trigger. In the red flash of the powder flame he glimpsed Bruce Tonkin crouched below the window's level. The lawman's gun, he could see, was out of line.

With that target clear in his mind, Bill threw two more shots, stepping quickly to one side. An instant later a lance of flame answered his fire. In the hallway outside, the pound of boots against the hardwood floors resounded. Someone threw the door open to let in a long shaft of light.

Tonkin lunged erect then and they stood face to face. The left side of the lawman's shirt was splotched with red. He was hurt but not badly, for his move to level his weapon was as sudden as Bill's, the grin on his face showing no touch of pain.

Their weapons blasted out at almost the same instant. Bill's was a shade faster. His bullet, ripping the length of the sheriff's forearm, was what saved his life. Yet he felt a hard blow slam into his hip, a stunning blow that immediately numbed his left leg as Tonkin's shot cut loose.

As he fell he thumbed his weapon empty, seeing the sheriff's body jerk backward and into the window. The last shot drove Tonkin off balance. He fell backward, hands all at once forgetting his gun and clawing at his bullet-chewed shirt front. The window gave way in a crash of falling glass and Tonkin crashed back through it.

Two shapes darkened the doorway, one tall and erect, the other shorter and slightly stooped. Bill

could see nothing but the outlines of these two against the light in the hallway. Pushing himself up onto one elbow, he threw his empty gun at them.

The heavy .45 hit the tallest squarely between the shoulders. He grunted audibly, half turned to show Bill the vaguely familiar profile of his lean face. Then Grubstake's booming voice sounded warning.

"Back, you murderin' fools!" he boomed.

Bill realized suddenly that it was Grubstake and Ed Bond who stood there in the doorway, for the oldster suddenly stepped farther out into the hall's light and swung up a shotgun to menace the surge of men who tried to crowd through the front door.

Crawling a little farther toward the door, Bill could see Barker standing there. The man had a six-gun in his hand which he now dropped under the threat of Grubstake's lined shotgun. He was barefoot and wore a dirty, patched pair of Levis, and a shirt too small for him. He had evidently ransacked the locker at the jail and found some of Tonkin's discarded clothes. Now, Barker pushed backward against the press of people behind him, trying to get out of range of Grubstake's shotgun.

"You there, Legell?" Ed Bond called.

"I'm all right, Ed."

"Where's Smith?" There was an unmistakable urgency in Bond's tone.

"Smith," Legell said, "get out there and quiet that mob. I'll have a gun lined at your back, so make it good."

Ed Bond heard him speak and turned to look into the room.

The light from the hall doorway showed Smith's form as he rose up from the chair behind which he had been crouching. He went toward the door slowly, reluctantly.

"Get a move on, Smith!" Ed Bond called when the banker stepped into the light. "Talk, and talk fast!"

There was no need now to urge the banker. The men in the outer doorway had pushed Barker aside and half a dozen had stepped into the hall. Those on the porch were shouting now, anxious to know what was stopping those in front. Someone out there emptied a gun in a deafening staccato to prod Boyd Smith into action. Facing those inside the door, the banker threw up his hands, commanding a partial, grudging silence.

"QUIET!" he shouted in an authoritative voice. He was one of the town's most respected citizens, and his word checked those inside the door who had been ready to rush Ed Bond and Grubstake. While they hesitated, Smith went on, "We have a United States deputy marshal in here. He's taking full charge now that Bruce Tonkin's dead."

"Deader'n a bear rug!" someone on the porch shouted. "But to hell with the marshal! He killed Clem Wallis and his badge won't save him gettin' his neck stretched."

Bill Legell had crawled to the doorway. Ed Bond, hearing Bill moving behind him, turned and saw him for the first time on hands and knees within a few feet of the doorway.

"Help me up, Ed," Bill said, and Bond willingly lifted him to his feet.

Bill staggered into the doorway, leaned weakly against the frame, blood matting his shirt along his right arm and his Levis stained redly along his left thigh.

Smith was hesitating uncertainly

at that unanswerable challenge from the porch. Those inside the doorway saw Legell now. One or two stepped menacingly forward.

But Legell's glance had settled on Barker. "Barker, tell them who shot Wallis. It was either you or Rabbit or Tonkin. Which one?"

"Rabbit!" Barker breathed, his eyes wide in sudden fear.

A man alongside Barker laid a rough hand on his shoulder. He turned to call to those behind, "Get back to the jail and get that other deputy. He's the man that got Wallis!"

The sound of hurrying footsteps sounded out along the porch, down the steps. But as the men in the hallway turned to go, Bill Legell called, "Hold on a minute." When they hesitated, he said levelly, "Barker, are you sure it was Rabbit?"

That heavy hand on his shoulder and the granitelike quality of Bill Legell's glance did something to Barker. His nerve broke. He made a sudden lunge that jerked his shoulder clear, and then he was stooping for the six-gun he had dropped a moment ago.

He snatched it up, whirled so that his back was against the wall. "Back!" he snarled. "Back, or I'll drill the lot of you!"

Bill Legell's weaponless left hand hung at his side. He felt Ed Bond's presence alongside. Barker, a gleam of frantic fear in his eyes, looked away from Legell toward those at the door for a fleeting instant. And in that brief space of time Bill reached across with his left hand and lifted Ed Bond's second heavy .45 from the holster at his thigh.

Barker must have caught a hint of that move along the margin of his vision. He swung his six-gun around as Bill's arced up. The two guns exploded in one deafening roar. Barker's body jerked convulsively as Bill felt the air-whip of the man's bullet hot against his cheek. Then Barker bent at the waist, lost his balance and toppled forward.

The man nearest knelt beside him, turning him over and putting a hand to the killer's chest.

"He's still good for hanging," he told the others, and before Grubstake or Ed or Bill could stop them they had lifted Barker to his feet and dragged him out the door.

"Stop them if you can, Grubstake," Bill called, and the oldster went out the door, calling to the men who had Barker.

"Smith, get a light in here," Ed Bond said. "Legell's bleedin' like a stuck pig."

Smith managed to light the lamp in the library and to help Ed Bond lift Bill Legell onto the couch. As soon as Bill was lying full length, the banker said hurriedly, "I'll run down for Doc Ackers." He started toward the hall doorway.

"Just a minute, Smith!" Bill called.

The banker paused and turned to face the couch. A thin smile was turning up the corners of Legell's wide mouth.

"Ed, see if you can find a pair of handcuffs in Tonkin's pockets," he directed, and as Ed Bond left the room after a puzzled glance at him, Bill looked at the banker.

"I'm not up on my laws," he drawled, "but there must be one that'll put a man in Yuma for a few years for conspiring to robbery. It wasn't just plain robbery, either. We might even make you an accessory to these murders."

Smith's face drained of all color. A sudden furtive look crept into his glance. He backed away toward the door. Just then Bill Legell raised

the hand hidden behind him at the back of the couch. Ed Bond's six-gun came up, and the bore of the weapon fell into line with the banker.

"Have a chair, Smith," Bill invited. "You aren't goin' anywhere."

LATER, when Grubstake had found Helen Bond after his futile attempt to stop the double hanging—the crowd had caught Rabbit in back of the jail—he brought her back to Smith's house. Ed Bond had already summoned Doc Ackers, who was working on Bill's arm when Helen and Grubstake came into the room. Grubstake took one look at Smith who sat handcuffed to the arm of a straight-backed chair. Grubstake swore softly. "I was wonderin' about him, Bill," he said. "Was he in on it, too?"

Legell didn't have time to answer Grubstake, probably couldn't have summoned the strength had he had the chance. For at that moment Helen saw the blood on the cut away sleeve of his shirt and went quickly to the couch.

"Bill, you're hurt!" she exclaimed. "You've done this for us!"

Her voice was unsteady, full of an emotion that made Bill Legell look up into her face. Some measure of the same emotion that was holding her must have showed in his glance, for she suddenly flushed and looked away.

"Is it serious, doctor?" she asked Doc Ackers. "Will he—" She was afraid to go on.

The medico took Helen by the arm and led her out of Legell's hearing. "That depends."

"On what?" the girl asked.

"On what kind of care he gets. He's lost a lot of blood."

Helen turned to Ed Bond. "You and Grubstake go on home. I'm staying. Send some of my things here in the morning."

Grubstake and Ed went out onto the street and walked toward the center of town where the crowd was still thick in the courthouse square.

"I've got a hunch, Ed," Grubstake said meditatively.

"What's the hunch?"

"That he'll pull through. Helen's a damn fine nurse." They walked along another half minute in silence.

"Something else," Grubstake said abruptly. "Did you catch the look on Helen's face when she saw him? Ed, I'll lay you a hundred to one Legell turns in his badge and starts houndin' us for a job."

"He'd be a handy man to have around," was Ed Bond's answer.

THE END.

MAN CAN NOW TALK WITH GOD

Strange Phenomena Follow New Teaching

MOSCOW, Idaho.—A new and revolutionary religious Movement which teaches that man can now talk with God, is attracting world-wide attention to its founder, Dr. Frank B. Robinson of Moscow, Idaho. This new Teaching, which, in its first year went into 67 different countries, is accompanied by phenomenal results in human lives, which are considered by many to border on the miraculous.

"PSYCHIANA," this new psychological and scientific religion, teaches that God exists here and now on the earth as the most dynamic yet invisible Power the world can ever know. The world is awaiting a revelation of this Power. "It is absolutely possible," says Dr. Robinson, "for every normal human being to contact and use this Power to bring health, happiness, and abundant success here and now, while living on this earth."

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The Story of the West

WHEN the white man met the redskin, amongst the sage and the rimrock it was usually a question whether it would be peace or war.

Up the broad expanse of the Missouri came the traders. Obtaining horses from the river tribes, their trade packs were transferred, and, filtering inland, they constantly sought new and more fertile fields for trap-line and trade.

These adventurers were skilled in reading every form of sign, from the story told by the blackened circle of a campfire to the mute tragedy surrounding the bleaching bones of some luckless wayfarer.

When Indians were encountered, it was again on his knowledge of signs that the trader depended; for among the various tribes there was no such thing as a universal spoken language. There was not even a similarity, for each language was entirely different.

The Sioux said "How" for "Yes"; the Mandan said "K'hoo"; and the Blackfoot's expression was "Ah." It is interesting to note that the Sioux apparently also used the word "How" as meaning just that since his salutation of "How do you do?" was spoken as "How ke che wa?" This same word "How" also had a fairly universal use among many of the tribes as meaning "Come on, let's begin," when referring to a powwow,

Told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

council or trade among Indian tribes.

But it was the language of signs which the trader used mainly. After the usual signs of friendship (such as spreading a blanket or raising the hand in salute) had been given, the first question of the trader was "What tribe?"

The most dreaded answers were made by the Indians holding their hands over their eyes (the sign for Blackfeet) or drawing the edge of the hand across the throat (the "cutthroat" sign of the Sioux).

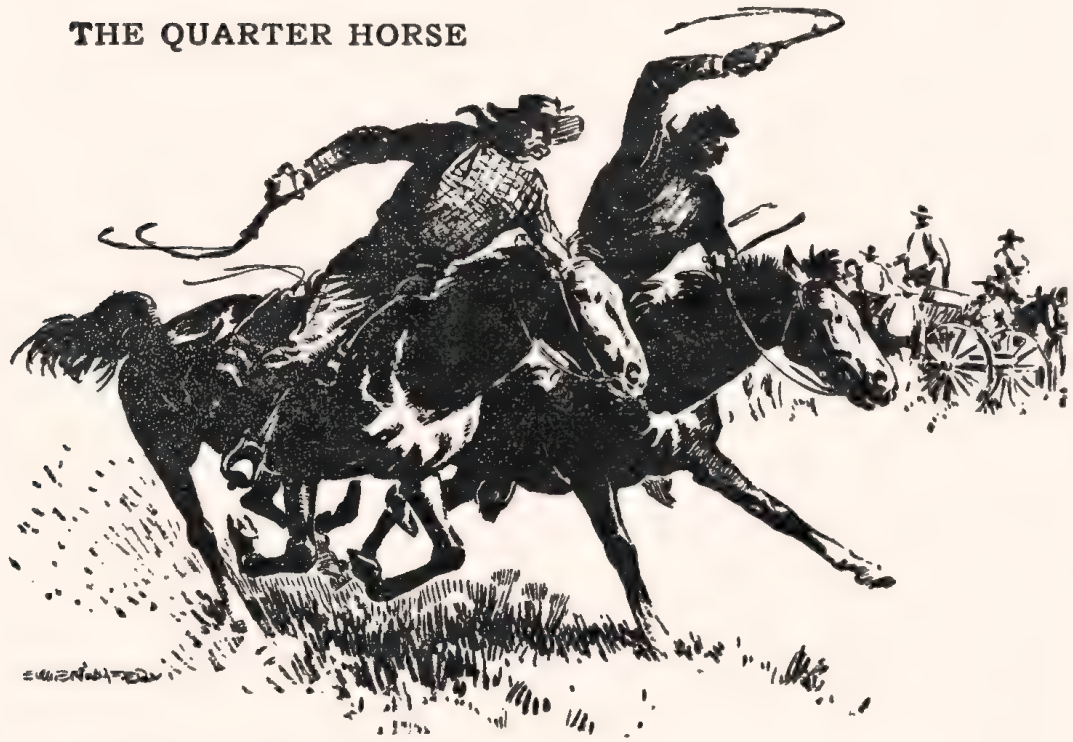
The handshake was in fairly general use among the tribes as a friendly gesture. Then the ceremonial pipe was brought out and lit, held to the four winds and then passed around the seated circle.

But on the other hand, if the chief of an approaching band was seen to stoop and scoop up a handful of dust and throw it in the air, the trader knew that he was "acting the mad buffalo," the sign of a challenge to battle, and that lead and arrows would soon be flying.

NEXT WEEK: THE POWWOW

Cow Horses

THE QUARTER HORSE



By CHARLES L. McNICHOLS

ABOUT sixty-five years ago a man by the name of Tibbets, who originally came from Ohio, started out for Oregon with a covered wagon and a bunch of loose horses, most of them work animals. Passing through Kansas City, he was approached by a stranger who offered to sell him a likely saddle mare for a hundred dollars. The stranger offered no explanation.

Tibbets was tired of riding plow horses. He figured the mare was a wonderful buy—and she was. The only reason the stranger sold her at that price was because he had just stolen her down in Indian territory and was afraid that the lawful Choctaw owner might be on his trail. The Ohio farmer didn't find that out until years later, but what he did discover was that the chunky little mare was as fast as lightning for a short run, and that every cowboy, mule-skinner, and bull-whacker that he met on the Oregon trail wanted to buy her or trade for her. Why, he didn't know.

When Tibbets was crossing Idaho through the Nez Perce country, excited Indians in buckskin garments were always riding up close alongside, shouting in the Chinook traders' jargon, "Hyha Shookum! Hyha quarter hoss!" Tibbets didn't understand this old-time challenge to trade, but he understood well enough that the Indians, like the various white men he had met on the trip, wanted the mare and wanted her bad.

So he hung onto the horse. Later he learned that a quarter horse was a particular sort of a race horse used in the West on local "brush" tracks about a quarter of a mile long.

Some smart scholar with a love for the outdoors could dig up enough facts for a long and mighty interesting book about those rangeland race tracks. Before there were churches, schools, or even towns, these tracks were the one and only spot for social gatherings in many sections of the West. And the frolicking and fighting that went on was something the old-timers still sit up all night to talk about.

There were no grandstands at these tracks, nor any programs or restaurant concessions. In the Southwest they were often than not just a narrow quarter-mile straightaway cut through the brush, and the spectators parked on either side, sitting on their horses or in their buckboards.

Circular tracks were also known. For some reason or other, the Indians of the Pacific Northwest went to a lot of trouble to build raised, circular tracks for their races. Some say the Indians copied a track built by a Hudson Bay trader near Walla Walla.

The quarter horse ruled these brush tracks, just as the thoroughbred rules the modern courses.

The point is that while the quarter horse never was a registered breed, and no one (that I've been able to find) knows what its blood lines were or how it originated, yet every horseman in those days, and that means about everybody, was able to distinguish a quarter horse on sight. Tibbets reported that several people recognized his mare as a brush runner when they were a quarter of a mile away.

IN appearance, quarter horses were considerably stockier than ordinary mustangs—that is, they were more inclined to be short-coupled, with greater depth in chest and girth. They were short-legged, or at least they looked short-legged because of their greater body depth. Their legs were slim and clean-lined, and altogether they were much trimmer-looking animals than the run-of-the-pasture range horses of the early days.

Some say they have thoroughbred blood in them, and some say the quarter horses got their best characteristics from an early introduction of Morgan blood. From appearance and gait, they were (and are) a whole lot more like Morgans than thoroughbreds. But they didn't have the size or bone of either the running horse or the Morgan.

As to stamina, they were a contradiction. They couldn't run more than a quarter, or most a half mile, at their top speed, which was very fast indeed, but they could go all day at a lope, and many old-timers report that they could outlast any thoroughbred on a long cross-country run.

The writer's personal opinion is that the quarter horse descended from the tame Spanish native of the Southwest, which had a good deal of the same blood as the wild mustang, but was better fed and had the benefit of a certain amount of selective breeding. Somebody in Texas or New Mexico, away back a couple of hundred years ago, evidently had a stocky little native horse that could run fast, and he saw to it that this pony left a lot of descendants that could run like blazes in a short race.

Texas has always claimed the quarter horse as its own, and the little brush runner certainly has made

important contributions to the present generation of Texas cow horses.

When Bob Kleberg, grandson of the famous "Cow King" of Texas, and present head of the great King cattle empire, wanted to develop a cow pony particularly suited for the south Texas range, he had experts comb the whole State for the best quarter horse to be found, and he bred this animal to fifty thoroughbred mares. By selection, he developed the "Solis" stock horse, the breed used on all the King ranches today.

The Texas Steeldust horse is nothing else but an offshoot or "strain" of the old quarter-horse line. Along about seventy years ago a man who lived near Weatherford, Texas, had a very good quarter-horse stallion named "Steeldust" that became famous for winning races and getting splendid colts that always conformed very close to their sire in type and performance.

There are a lot of real Steeldust horses in Texas today. All over the range country, in fact. But so popular is the name that any horse of the quarter-horse type is apt to be called a "Steeldust" by its proud owner. Right now there is a movement going ahead to standardize and register the Steeldust line, the same as the Palomino has been registered in California.

Here's an interesting sidelight. Mr. Frank M. King, an old-time cattle man and well-known writer on historical subjects, tells me that there was a registered Morgan horse foaled about 1840 that had the name "Steeldust." This was twenty-five or thirty years before the Weatherford quarter horse "Steeldust" was born, and it brings up a speculation as to whether or not the Weatherford horse might have carried some of the blood of the Morgan of the same name. It is entirely possible, because we know that several Morgan horses were brought into Texas before the Civil War.

Anyhow, the name "Steeldust" has become so popular that the old "quarter horse" is hardly ever heard any more. For practical purposes they have come to mean the same thing.

LIKE all the native "Spanish" strains in the Southwest, the quarter horse was, and is, a dandy cow horse. It takes to working cattle just like a duck takes to water, which is not surprising, for its ancestors chased longhorns in Texas and Mexico for three or four hundred years.

The old Mexican ranchers were anything but scientific horse breeders, but if a colt showed himself cow handy it was kept and worked and bred. If it didn't it was either gelded and used as a pack animal, or killed and fed to the Indian slaves. Long years of this kind of elimination made for a race of natural cow horses.

Lately quite a feud has grown up, particularly in Texas, between the boys who want to establish and regulate the quarter-horse-Steeldust line and those who advocate the use of thoroughbreds and half-breds for ranch work.

So far there hasn't been any shooting, but from the hot letters both sides are writing to the newspapers and stock-breeder magazines there's liable to be a massacre any moment.

The boys who back the thoroughbreds take the view that the running horse is just naturally the best horse in the whole world for any and all purposes where a horse is used

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THE RACE WITH THE NOOSE

by CHERRY WILSON

The Race With The Noose

THROUGH Colorado's golden foothills, the stolen horse herd passed swiftly by secret trails. It flashed in and out of hidden arroyos, around shoulders of projecting ridges, screened by thickets of aspen and pine and the blue mountain mist that fell between. A trail-fagged, thin, footsore band, numbering some two hundred horses. Grays, bays, calicos, duns blended into one drab mass by an all-enveloping coating of dust. And pressed to the very limit of their endurance—as they had been pressed all the way from the Rio Grande—by five gaunt, dust-caked, raw-nerved men!

Wolves, these men! Veritable wolves of the range. Wolves they had been at the start and the grinding toil, the heat and dust of the trail, the constant terror of pursuit, had intensified every wolfish attribute. This smothering noon, in the wilds of the Saddleback Range, on rough, steep slopes that slowed their flight, each of the five had reached a degree of savagery in which he could easily have snapped and rended any other one of the pack!

Back in the drag of the band, Jicarilla—a wizened, yellow-fanged wolf with a coyote strain—mercilessly lashed the horses on, jamming them against those ahead, forcing them out into the boulders and brush beside the trail. The rider on the flanks of the herd came pounding back.

"Are you crazy?" he yelled. The flank rider was San Sabe—a lean, dark wolf, whose sad, seared face and haunted eyes held a gleam that was human. "Lay off that quirt, Jic! You're pilin' 'em up in the rocks!"

"Then straighten 'em out!" snarled the drag man, madly lashing again. "Keep 'em movin'!"

San Sabe forced his sweating horse between Jicarilla and the band. "They're movin' as fast as they can," he warned. "Faster than they will, if we don't use some sense! Their feet's worn to the quick. Look! There's blood in the tracks!"

But Jicarilla's wild eyes merely flicked to those red stains in the dust, then rolled to the trail in back. He said shudderingly, "There's blood in our tracks that didn't come from horses' feet!"

"You better forget that!" snapped San Sabe sharply.

"Forget it?" the rustler's voice rose to a shriek. "When any hour, any *minute*, a posse may catch up with us! For they'll come! In my sleep I see 'em—comin' with a rope—"

"Hang onto yourself!" San Sabe saw that the nerve of the wolf with the coyote strain was beginning to crack. "In two days more we'll be in the malpais flow, where tracks won't show. And from there on—" He broke off, staring over the heaving backs of the horses to the head of the band.

Black Dagget, leader of the pack, who had been riding in advance to scout out the trail, was plunging back. He paused to speak to the man pointing the way with the old lead mare. Instantly this man swung in ahead of the band, stopping it. And now Dagget came pounding down the panting column toward them.

"What's wrong?" yelled San Sabe.

Dagget savagely jerked up. He was a big, black-bearded brute with nothing human about him, nor any strain of coyote. He was all wolf.

"A big trail herd ahead!" Dagget spat with an oath. "Two-three thousand cattle spread over the

down slope of that hill yonder. We can't get by without bein' seen!"

"How about cuttin' higher—across this mountain spur west?"

"Too far off our course. And too rough. These crowbaits would lay down on us!"

"Then what's the plan?"

Dagget's fist crashed down on the saddlehorn. "We are goin' on! Might be them drovers won't come close enough to read our brands. If they do—"

"Yeah, we know!" San Sabe finished for him bitterly. "Dead men don't talk! You've sung that, Dagget, from the start. But dead men *do* talk! Them two Bar Z men we left in the dust of that corral on the Sandy Fork will talk plenty when—"

"They *have* talked!" Shrilly Jicarilla voiced the fear that had haunted him every mile of the long trail. "They've told it all! How they surprised us at work, and Dagget shot—"

"Shut up, you fool!" roared the leader, twisting about in the saddle. "We're all in this together. And if we're caught, that posse won't ask who pulled the trigger!"

But seeing the other men, Dubois and Bat, riding back, Dagget modified his tone to include the lot. "We won't get caught," he assured them, "if we all pitch in and work. Chances are they ain't found them men yet. And anyhow we got a long start. When we hit the malpais rock, our tracks will end. We can hide out there till danger's over, then slip into Wyomin', sell this herd and scatter."

"If we could only go faster!" whined Jicarilla. "If we had more help. There's more hosses here than we can handle, played out like they are."

His eyes, jerking from the back trail to roll over the weary band, froze on something beyond. The eyes of every man followed. A rider was coming down the slope, around the horses! A rider, whose black sombrero and leather chaps were dusted over as thickly as theirs. And whose buckskin horse showed the same signs of travel.

I'LL do the talkin'," said Dagget in an undertone. "Likely one of the crew from that cattle outfit. But wherever he's from, he'll see our brands and—*he don't go back!*"

Loud on the hush fell the panting breaths of the winded band, the jingle of spurs and bit chain, as the rider came on toward those five wolves waiting—

Five? No! For there was about San Sabe then—even to a greater degree than was shown that night when he rode back to the Sandy Fork and found what Dagget had done to the Bar Z men—that something human that set him apart. He had resolved at that corral that, while he could lift a gun to prevent it, there'd be no more blood upon their trail!

And waiting there, taut in the saddle, he was struck by something about that rider. Something in the tilt of his head, the swing of his lithe figure seemed strangely familiar. Yet San Sabe could swear he'd never seen him before. Scarcely more than a boy, he was. Twenty, perhaps. His dark, young face betrayed all a boy's eagerness for life, and showed utter inexperience with the side of life known by Black Dagget's gang.

"Howdy!" he greeted, reining in.

"Howdy," Dagget growled in return.

The boy seemed not to sense the hostility around him. "I'm with the Lone Star trail herd," he said.

"We're up ahead. Just lettin' the cattle drift along where grazin' is good. I was ridin' around killin' time when I saw your horses, and rode up—"

"Curious, huh?" snarled Dagget in a tone that dropped San Sabe's hand to the gun in his belt.

"No," the boy's smile faded. "Lonesome, I reckon. We've been a long time on the trail. And I got tired talkin' to the same men. Talkin' nothin' but trails, grass, and cattle fords. That's slow talk. I ain't a cowman."

He fell silent then, building a cigarette. Dagget swerved his horse a bit. San Sabe's fingers closed on the butt of his gun. But he had misjudged Dagget's purpose. For the glitter in his eyes was replaced by a crafty gleam.

"Not a cowman, huh?" Dagget repeated. "What are you then?"

"Nothin'—yet," the boy answered and the reckless flash in his eyes seemed strangely familiar to San Sabe. "But I aim to do something soon besides poke along in the dust kicked up by cows! They told me when I joined up in El Pas', there'd be plenty of excitement. But I ain't seen none."

"So you're huntin' excitement?" Dagget drawled with his leer which passed for a smile.

"I sure am!"

"Why not join up with us, then? We're shorthanded. Plenty of excitement with our outfit, too. And I'll guarantee there'll be no pokin' along."

"Where you going'?"

"Same way you're headin'—Wyomin'."

The boy nodded eagerly, "I'd sure like to throw in with you. But I'll have to ride back and tell the boss."

"You'll tell nobody nothin'," Dagget said curtly, "if you travel with us! You go to work *now*. And we'll go through that cow outfit on a gallop!"

"But I got wages comin'."

"Forget 'em! When we get to Wyomin', we'll cut you in equal shares on these broomtails. That'll be more than your wages is worth."

A sixth of these horses! A *year's* wages. More! The boy said decisively, "Well, there's nothin' else I got to go back for. I'm ridin' my own horse. And the boss will figure I just got sick of the grind and cut loose."

"Then let's get goin'!" Dagget waved the men into action. Swinging back, he asked, "What do they call you, kid?"

"Reck'" the boy answered, "Reck Jarvis."

San Sabe started violently. *Jarvis!* That was *his* name before he became San Sabe, before he ganged up with men like these! And this boy might have been himself—with the years stripped off! That's why he looked familiar! Every word—gesture—Was it possible? No! Fate couldn't have been that cruel to him! There was none of his blood to bear the name. A common name, Jarvis!

Nevertheless, every human instinct rebelled against this boy joining them. Rebelled so wildly that, drawing Dagget aside, he protested hotly.

"I don't like this, Dagget! No matter what we tell Jic, you know we may be caught up with any minute. If that kid's with us, he'll get the same medicine!"

"It's either that," swore Black Dagget, "or what I was sayin' when he rode up!"

That he wouldn't go back! San Sabe's protest died on his tongue.

THE horses were thrown into motion. The new hand rode with Sam Sabe on the flanks of the herd, never dreaming that this was a race with the noose! That any instant a posse might come, and if one swung, they all swung!

But working with him, wordless, grim, San Sabe thought of those things! And as the horses galloped down the slope, circling the scattered Lone Star cattle as far as possible from the camp where cowmen were lazing away the noon, too indolent to more than remark their passing, San Sabe thought: better for Reck if this race *was* lost! San Sabe knew it would have been better for him if he had lost his first race with a posse!

For in this boy, Reck, he saw himself ere that race was run. And the sight of him here loosed thoughts long stilled in his mind. He saw himself marrying Nan in the little church in old Fort Worth! Going to live with her folks, the Carters, who hadn't thought he was good enough. And God knew he hadn't been! But he was so young—just a harum-scarum. And Nan loved him. And when her people made their life so miserable they couldn't go on as they were—

"Find us a home of our own, Lin," Nan's dear voice seemed to speak again. Nan's blue eyes smiled through her tears, as when he'd kissed her goodby under the old Carter elms! "And don't be long," she whispered. "But long or short the time—I'll be waiting, Lin!"

And he'd left to make a home for her. But it had taken so long he'd got desperate, and gone in on a rustling deal to make a quick stake. He'd got caught, and had to shoot his way out, and could *never* go back to Nan waiting for him in Fort Worth! He'd had to shut her very memory out of his heart and go on—running his life out with the pack!

Suddenly San Sabe vowed in his tortured heart that this boy who might have been himself would not go on with Black Dagget's gang!

Night found the stolen horse band many miles north of the Saddleback Range, and that much nearer the malpais flow, where tracks wouldn't show. Two days to go! Two days in which anything might happen!

They camped beside a rippling stream. The light of their campfire crimsoned the aspens along its banks. A pale moon, resting like a silver disk on the distant mountain rim, revealed the horses huddled on the flat above, too tired to graze. The men, surly and taciturn, more savage and nerve-strung than ever, were squatting about, resting from their weary grind.

His friendly overtures repulsed on every hand, Reck abruptly rose and walked beyond the circle of firelight, watched by the glittering eyes of the pack. Nobody spoke. But shortly San Sabe got up, stretched his stiffened muscles, and followed the boy up the creek to where Reck had picketed his buckskin apart from the other saddle stock. Here, pausing in the shadows, San Sabe heard him talking to his horse.

"No use askin' me what it's all about, Bucky. For I don't know. And these wranglers ain't handin' out any information. They're sure th' toughest lot of hombres I ever run up against!"

"And the toughest you're apt to run up against, Reck!" San Sabe said suddenly out of the dark. He stepped up beside the buckskin, his seared eyes burning into the boy's. "You'd better cut loose from us—hit a shack back to that cow outfit!"

Voicelessly, Reck stared up at the only civil one of the gang. Not that *he* talked. But there was a warmth in his silence, a sadness on his still, dark face that drew the boy strangely.

"Why?" he asked wonderingly. "When you're needin' help?"

"Because," warned San Sabe, "you're headin' for trouble!"

"Reckon I ain't afraid of trouble!" Reck shrugged.

It was as if San Sabe's own voice was echoing back over the years saying he wasn't afraid of trouble—and riding blind into it!

"Boy, where you from?" San Sabe asked in a strained voice.

"Fort Worth."

Fort Worth—and his name was Jarvis! San Sabe reeled against the horse. "You've got folks there? A mother—"

"She's . . . dead."

Sad as a farewell spoken forever came the creek's soft ripple, the aspen's murmur. San Sabe, in a voice scarcely audible, said, "A father?"

"I never seen him," the boy cried bitterly. "Nor wanted to! He left my mother before I was born. He was a rustler. A gunman. He never done a decent thing!"

San Sabe's lean face worked in the dark. "Did—she tell you that?"

"No," cried the boy passionately. "But her folks told me! All my life they kept throwin' it up. Everything I done wrong—and I never done anything right with them—they'd say, 'Like father, like son!' Till I pulled out an' left 'em three months back. Told 'em I'd have the game as well as the name!"

BLINDLY San Sabe turned and stumbled back to camp, those bitter words ringing in his heart. They echoed as he lay in his blankets, staring up at the dark. No need to ask Reck his mother's name. A man knew his own blood when it spoke to him! Reck was his son—Nan's—born after he left her. And her people had thrown his bad name up to Reck, until the boy wanted the game, and was after it!

And Nan—"*Long or short the time, I'll be waiting, Lin!*"

Oh, the time had been long! San Sabe's gaunt face, seared by the grief he'd known in it, gleamed wet in the night. Up there beyond the stars, Nan was waiting, believing in him, trusting him to save their son! And if it was the last thing he ever did he must do this one decent thing!

Gray dawn found the horses again in flight. There was no noon stop that day. Dagget planned an early camp at a lonely ford on the Cache—last water in the forty-mile stretch to the malpais flats. The horses couldn't make this stretch without feed and rest.

And while the sun was yet an hour from setting, they rode out on a high rim overlooking Cache River—to find a camp already there! A covered wagon stood in the willows beside the ford trail, with a tent stretched beside it. Savagely Dagget cursed the bad luck that seemed to dog them.

"Some emigrant with the whole state to camp in," he frothed to his men, "had to pick this crossing!"

But San Sabe, intently studying the scene below, said soberly, "Something wrong down there. No smoke. No horses. No sign of life anywhere."

"We'd better investigate," Reck spoke up. "Somebody may be hurt or sick."

Furiously Dagget whirled on him. "We don't go near that camp! Savvy? We got troubles of our own. We'll have to circle that ford.

There's a canyon cuts in a mile up the rim. We'll pocket up there till morning, then swim the river!"

So they lashed the flagging band on up the rim, dropping into the shadowy side canyon that cut back from the main river's gorge. The horses needed no watching here, even had they been fresh and inclined to wander, for the canyon walls cut them off on three sides, the river on the other. Thirstily, the tired animals crowded into the stream to drink, then limped back to stand with drooping heads, preferring rest to the painful activity of searching out the sparse clumps of grass on the rocky floor.

But there was no rest for the men. Men can't rest under such strain. It wasn't possible to hide the trail of such a band for long. Not until they reached the malpais rock. And they seemed to sense now, they'd never make it! Every second increased the danger. Yet precious hours must be wasted here!

Too keyed-up, fearful, to unsaddle, they paced back and forth, nervously watching the rims above. San Sabe's tension was an agony lest trouble should break and Reck be identified with this rustling gang—and die with it! Suddenly, in this black thought, he decided to tell Reck everything—at no matter what cost to themselves! *They* didn't matter. They were wolves!

Instantly acting on this resolve, he stepped down to the river, where the boy stood staring into the water.

"I want to talk to you, Reck."

Reck turned a troubled face his way, "I'm glad," he said. "I want to talk to you, too, San Sabe."

"About what?" Maybe Reck had decided to leave on his own hook!

"About that camp down the river," said the boy worriedly. "Suppose something is wrong. It ain't right to go off and leave folks so far from help without we investigate!"

Quickly seizing this opening San Sabe said, "You can leave folks in worse shape! Like we left two men back on the Sandy Fork! Like we'd have left *you* on the Saddleback, if you hadn't been the kind you was, and we hadn't needed help!"

And as the boy shrank from him, half-grasping his meaning, he rushed on. "I got to talk fast, while I got the chance, Reck. I tried to warn you last night. Now I'm givin' it to you straight! These horses we're drivin' was rustled in Texas! We killed two men gettin' away with 'em! There'll be a posse after us. That's why we let nobody read our brands. Dagget says dead men don't talk! If those emigrants as much as see our camp—"

Breaking in on himself, he cried with terrible force, "We're wolves, Reck! You don't want the game you'll get, if you run with this pack!"

Though white with the horror of that, the boy flashed the spirit that had been San Sabe's own ruin. "I'm goin' on!" he cried. "My father was a wolf and I reckon I got the makin's of one!" In the awful belief ground into him by years of cruel reiteration, he added, "I can't be anything else with his blood in my veins!"

White with the horror of these words, unable to meet the hot eyes looking up into his, San Sabe looked away—and froze.

A stranger was walking up to the fire, where Dagget and the men had drawn together watching him approach! A tall, stooped man in faded hickory shirt and jeans. Someone, he guessed, from the emigrant wagon. And he knew by Reck's swift start that the boy had seen and guessed the same.

"There's goin' to be trouble!" San

Sabe warned. "I'll do what I can. But for God's sake, don't *you* make any play!"

HURRYING up there, they joined the ring about the visitor, now telling Dagget in a friendly drawl that rang strangely on the charged atmosphere, that he was Jim Davis from Little Rock. That wild horses had stolen his team, and he was stranded down at the ford with his wife and daughter.

"Been stranded there a week," he explained, "an' I was beginnin' to think I'd be there forever. For th' way that wild band was hittin' for th' mountains when they scooped my team in, they ain't like to stop short o' timberline!"

He looked around the ring of faces, expecting some comment, but none was forthcoming.

"Wouldn't care for myself," he went on. "But my woman's sick in th' wagon. That's why we're travelin'. Figger she'll be better in Wyomin'."

Again, he paused. And again he met that same dead silence.

"I was huntin' my hosses," he continued lamely. "An' comin' in—seein' your camp from th' rim, I—Waal, I figgered you-all might spare me a couple of hosses to get out of here."

"We got none to spare," Dagget stated coldly.

Davis flushed through his deep burn of wind and sun. "I'd pay for them," he pleaded. "Most anything you ask. An' take anything."

"We ain't sellin'!"

Understanding flashed in the man's face then. This hidden camp—the hard-driven band—these hard-bitten, hostile men! A curious tension straightened him but his gaze met Dagget's unflinchingly.

"Reckon I savvy," he said stiffly. "Waal, if that's the' kind o' men you be, we wouldn't be wantin' your hosses nohow." He turned abruptly and stalked back toward the canyon wall where the trail ran up.

Every eye fastened on that broad receding back. The man walked thirty paces—fifty—then Dagget suddenly stepped forward, his hand dropping to his gun. And Reck, who had been too dazed by San Sabe's disclosures to realize fully what was going on, awoke to Dagget's awful intention! Forgetting utterly that injunction to make no play; too horror stricken to see San Sabe's quick step to prevent the action; knowing only that, no matter what his father had been, he wasn't a wolf, hadn't the first makings of one, Reck sprang at Black Dagget!

"Stop!" he cried in a tone that jerked the emigrant around to stand a helpless witness to all that happened. "Stop, Dagget! You can't do that!"

Distracted by the outbreak, Dagget swung around and snarled, "Do what?"

"I know what you got in mind!" the boy flamed. "Davis seen our brands. And you think dead men don't talk!"

Dagget shot a murderous glance at San Sabe. "So somebody's been wisin' the cub up!"

Steadily, San Sabe said, "I wised him up—for his own good. He's only a kid. He ain't in this yet."

"That's right!" Dagget's laugh was devilish. "Well, he'll be in it now deep as the rest! So deep he can't slip off some dark night and slip a noose over our heads!" Then he roared at Reck, "*You'll* do this job! You'll fix that pilgrim so he can't talk! Get that gun out of your belt. When I say shoot—"

But San Sabe's gun was already

out. "Hold it, Dagget!" he warned, his voice deadly. "Don't move! Reck ain't doin' no shootin'. And neither are you!"

Stunned by this turn, Dagget crouched, his gun half drawn. Dubois, Bat, and Jicarilla shifted closer. San Sabe's play would let this boy and the emigrant get away—tell everything! They were with Dagget, and San Sabe knew it.

"What I said goes for the pack!" he snapped, then motioned to Reck. "Go, boy! Get on your horse and light out!"

But reaching now for that gun Dagget had ordered him to draw, Reck cried, "And leave you here! I've been a fool, San Sabe. But I'm not that color!"

Eyes never wavering from that quartet, San Sabe jerked the gun from Reck with his free hand, and pulled the boy back.

"You're not mixin' in this!" he said grimly. "Do what I say—*go!*"

He pulled Reck back, as he backed off himself. Slowly, step by step, they backed from those men—who watched glittery-eyed for any opening. They were within ten feet of the horses hunched by the river when Dubois—a little apart from the others, and slightly out of San Sabe's vision—jerked his gun up and fired. The bullet grazed San Sabe's scalp but his own gun spoke with deadly effect! Dubois spun and slumped to the ground.

"Get among the horses!" San Sabe shouted to Reck. "They're the only cover!"

Together, they threw themselves back into the band while Dagget and his men plunged after them like maddened wolves. All was wild confusion then—the hoarse, fierce yelps of the pack, their roaring guns, the plunging hoofs and shrill whistling of the frightened band!

But suddenly a horrible, nerve-shattering scream from Jicarilla carried above the uproar. "*Look!*" he shrieked wildly. "On th' rims! *Th' posse—*"

AND the words carried to San Sabe, deep in that welter of pitching horses. Glancing swiftly up there, he saw riders plunging down the trail, fanning out on all three walls of the canyon pocket.

"The river's our only chance!" he yelled at Reck, as the lunging horses hurled them apart. "Mebbe you can swim out of it!"

Back came the loyal cry, "Not without you, San Sabe!"

And he saw the boy, caught in the press, fighting back to him—striking, pushing at the fear-crazed horses! Saw, with fear in his heart, a great blaze-faced black, blood spurting from a bullet wound in his neck, rear over Reck, slashing out with flailing forefeet! Saw Reck go down from a terrible hoof-blow.

Madly battling to where he lay on the very brink of the stream, San Sabe lifted the boy in his arms. Then the maddened band, stampeding from the deafening gunfire, forced them into the river. And he was swimming, holding the unconscious Reck above water, buffeted, splashed on every hand by the lunging horses, carried along with them, until, hitting deeper water, they ceased to lunge and began to swim smoothly, with high-held heads, manes and tails adrift on the current.

Glancing back over that sea of heads and manes, San Sabe saw Dagget and Bat backing to the water, firing as they came, the posse closing in behind!

Over the rim, the red sun suddenly dropped from sight, as if it couldn't bear to look. But the sky was bright with its crimson stain, the

reflection reddening the river until it ran like life's own tide. And in this red tide, San Sabe—every trace of the wolf washed from him until he was all human—swam with his unconscious son!

A saddled horse, Reck's buckskin, was washed against them and San Sabe grabbed a stirrup. Somehow, he must climb on, get the boy up there. He reached for the horn and struggled into the saddle, tugging at Reck's dead weight. But ere he could lift him out of the water, there was a shout from the shore, followed by a shot. A terrific blow knocked him over the cantle and he nearly lost his grip on Reck.

But hanging there, the watery world revolving about him, the redness fading in awful shadow, he realized more shots would follow. He slipped into the water to cling like grim death to the saddlehorn with one hand, to Reck with the other, and was swept on, remembering through all the blackness and pain, that he must keep Reck's head above water until they reached the other shore.

His brain clearing in the agony of exertion, he saw they'd never reach that shore! For the buckskin had been swept downstream by the struggle and they were between the towering walls of the gorge that banked the river the whole mile to the ford! As his lifeblood ran from the wound in his back, one thought sustained San Sabe's fading consciousness. He must hang on, fight off the blackness, get the boy to some safe place! Then, maybe, by God's mercy, he could go to Nan —waiting for him somewhere beyond this maelstrom of strife and pain!

On and on he fought, while eventually there came a lunging, violent wrench that broke his grip on the saddle, followed by a mighty thrashing of water and a jolt that seemed to rend body from soul! Then the waters closed over him, and San Sabe drifted through an illimitable void— Drifted, he thought, to that world beyond!

For Nan was here, bending over him, her sweet face filled with deep concern! And in great, racking gasps he was telling her he'd done his best, but the water was so swift, and he was so numb from his hurt, he couldn't hang on to Reck. And the boy—

"The boy's safe!" she cried pityingly. "See! He's lying here in the sand beside you. The horse landed you so close to shore, I was able to pull you both from the water."

Her voice cut through the haze in his mind and he knew it wasn't Nan, but a girl with eyes as blue and voice as gentle. And looking beyond her, he saw a wagon in the willows and a tent stretched beside it. He had reached the ford! This was the emigrant's daughter! And Reck wasn't safe!

Wildly, he told her that. Told her the posse would be after them. And Reck didn't belong to that pack fighting for its life back there in the canyon! But the posse wouldn't know it and he'd get the same medicine!

"I'll hide him!" cried the girl. "I'll hide him in the wagon. They'll never look for him there."

It was a far better chance for Reck than San Sabe could have hoped for. And rallying every atom of strength and will, he struggled to his feet.

"Hide him in your wagon!" he begged the girl. "Then . . . take him to Wyomin'. Times he might get . . . talkin' wild. Sayin' how he . . . can't amount to anything . . . because his father . . . never

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GHOST CAMP GAMBLE

by JOSEPH F. HOOK

Ghost Camp Gamble

THE *rat-tat-tat* of someone hammering brought Big Bill Harris and Slim Weston out of their cabins on the run. They were the only inhabitants in the ghost camp of Cinnabar where they eked out a living by working their placer claims, certain that some day the old camp would come to life again.

They sped down the grass-grown street, past false-fronted buildings and cabins in the last stages of decay, to where Sheriff Lige Luton stood observing his handiwork with a critical eye.

"Well, boys, it shore looks like you ain't gonna live here much longer," the sheriff said, after exchanging greetings.

"Who says so?" demanded Big Bill.

"That notice does," the sheriff replied. "This camp's up for sale, 'cording to law. Back taxes is nine hundred bucks. Pussonally I wouldn't offer nine cents for it, if you was to throw in yore burros to boot."

Big Bill shifted his cud of tobacco. "Listen, Lige," he growled, "nobody's askin' yore opinion about how much the ol' camp's worth. It's worth a heap to us; it's our home. We've lived here nigh on to forty year."

The sheriff realized he had spoken out of turn. "Sorry, boys," he hastened to apologize. "I done fergot about that. Howsumever, they's nothing I can do about it. The law's the law, and I'm only its hired man. Better read the notice."

The two prospectors walked over to it and scaned it intently. Then Big Bill scored a bull's-eye upon its spotless white surface with a squirt of tobacco juice, just to show his disgust.

"Well," Slim Weston observed with a touch of sadness in his voice, "that's as plain as the nose on yore face. Thirty days from date, Cinnabar goes under the sheriff's hammer, for nine hundred bucks. Too darn bad."

"Tell me somethin', Lige," Big Bill said to the sheriff. "What's behind all this?"

"Well, all I know is what the auditor told me," the lawman answered. "It seems like Melvin Dugard—"

"Mel Dugard!" Big Bill exclaimed angrily. "That little weasel, huh? Why, me and Slim here helped run him outa camp. He used to own a store in Cinnabar, when she was runnin' wide open, and he kep' his gold scales fixed so's the boys allus got the dirty end of every deal."

"You ain't telling me nothing," the sheriff said. "Don't ferget I was a deputy in them days. However, Mel's been doing right well in the real-estate business, down in Juniper, and now he's got his eye on this old ghost camp."

"What's he wanna do with it?" Big Bill demanded.

"Fix it up for a summer camp," the sheriff explained. "Aims to repair the cabins and rent 'em to tourists. The State's gonna build a new highway past here next year."

TOWERISTS—in Cinnabar?" Big Bill shouted indignantly, sluicing a bee from a blossom with another jet of amber juice. "Why . . . why, I'll see Mel Dugard in hell afore I'll let him git the camp for back taxes!"

"Well," the sheriff grinned, "you've got the privilege of bidding agin' him on the day o' the sale."

"And the way I'll bear down on

that there biddin' won't be nobody's business but mine and Dugard's," Big Bill promised savagely, while Slim Weston nodded approval. "When I'm through with that mink, he'll know he's been 'tendin' a real sale."

The sheriff toed the stirrup, settled into the saddle, and flipped a hand in farewell.

"Go to it, boys," he called back over his shoulder encouragingly. "And good luck to you."

"Well, what d'ye know about that?" Slim Weston growled as they started to go back to their cabins.

"I know we gotta git a hump on," Big Bill growled, "if we aim to get ahead of old Mel Dugard. A towerist camp! Bah! I'll 'towerist camp' that little wart."

"Yeah, but it'll take nine hundred bucks to do it," Slim reminded him soberly.

"I reckon that's right," Big Bill agreed. "Let's go back to the cabin and see how much dust we got."

A comparison of pokes revealed gold dust to the value of little more than two hundred dollars.

"Less than a third of nine hundred bucks," Slim said forlornly. "Now ain't that something?"

Big Bill nodded. "Lissen," he said, "it ain't no use us tryin' to wash the balance outa our claims in thirty days. They're not good enough for that. We gotta figger out somethin' else."

The old-timers put in the remainder of the day and part of the night making plans to acquire the necessary money and discarding them almost as soon as they were made. It was beginning to look like a hopeless problem when suddenly the solitude of the ghost camp was interrupted by the loud beat of a horse's hoofs.

"Well, look who's here!" Big Bill exclaimed as he and Slim dashed outside.

The newcomer was Pat Healy. Pat had lived on in Cinnabar with Big Bill and Slim long after the camp had petered out. But his sublime faith in its eventual comeback had finally waned and he had secured a job on a gold dredge operating in the creek above the camp.

Pat dismounted from the horse by simply clutching its mane with both hands and falling from the saddle. He weaved about uncertainly when he got to his feet and then reeled into the cabin.

"So!" Big Bill said scornfully, "It was payday at the dredge today and you sneaked into Juniper and got soused. You, the guy that's allus gonna save yore wages agin' the time Cinnabar comes back! Hand over the bottle that's stickin' outa yore pocket, you pie-eyed Piute. Me and Slim shore need a drink."

"It's a divil of a hard pardner, ye are, Big Bill," Pat said thickly, handing the bottle over grudgingly. "Mind ye leave enough to cover the bottom of the bottle, me bucks."

Big Bill uncorked the bottle with a twist of his teeth, took a slug himself, then handed it to Slim. Pat staggered over to a chair, misjudged the distance, and sat down heavily on the floor with a vacant grin.

"How much money you got left, Pat?" Big Bill demanded.

Before the miner could reply, Slim picked him up, set him on the chair and went through his pockets. The result was a twenty-dollar gold piece, which he handed over to Big Bill.

Pat stared at it with unbelieving eyes. "It's rich, I am," he chuckled. "If I'd knowed I had that much on me, I'd 'a' stayed in Juniper, so I would. Must've ketched in the lining of me pants pocket."

"Pat, you listen to me," Big Bill began, and then told the story of the coming delinquent tax sale. By the time he was through, Pat had laboriously risen to his feet, and now he was swaying unsteadily, fists doubled and bleary eyes watering.

"So it's that divil Dugard up to his ol' tricks again, is it?" he demanded belligerently. "Just wait till I get me hooks on him. It's old I'm getting, and me wind ain't what it used to be, but I can lick that—"

"IT'LL take purty nigh nine hundred bucks to lick Dugard," said Big Bill dryly. "All you've got toward that is twenty. So set down ag'in and listen, afore I knock you down. Can't you think up a plan to git that much dough corraled in a hurry? What about signin' yore next pay check over to us?"

Pat stared at him for a long moment, the belligerency draining from his eyes and giving place to a look or horror. He fell back in his chair with a groan.

"The saints save me!" he mumbled. "Now I've went and done it!"

"Done what?" the other two chorused.

"I've done fergot to buy the foreman a new gold pan, so help me!" Pat gasped. "He'll be after tying a can to me tail, so he will!"

He was on his feet the next moment, staggering over to the shelves. He reached up and helped himself to Big Bill's gold pan.

"Put that back, you souse!" the prospector yelled at him. "That's the only one I've got left, and what with this here tax sale comin' up, I ain't spendin' any money for another."

"I'll give ye five bucks for it," Pat bargained.

"I'll give you a smack in the puss," Big Bill roared, "if you don't put it back on the shelf."

"I'll raise it to sivin, though it's a damn holdup," Pat said desperately.

"Put it back!" Big Bill thundered.

"Tin dollars, thin, fer the damned auld pan, and may the divil choke ye for the thief ye are!" Pat shouted.

"You ain't got a dime, so put it back. I got yore money now, and into the common fund it goes, savvy? We gotta keep Cinnabar outa Dugard's and them towerists' clutches. Do you wanna be homeless, Pat?"

"No," Pat replied. "And I don't wanna be fired, naythur. That's what'll happen whin I gits back to the dredge without no gold pan. Won't ye take pity on an auld man?"

"Aw, cut out the squabbling, you two," Slim put in. "I got an extry one you can have if you need it that bad, Pat."

"If I need it that bad!" Pat cried excitedly. "Say, the pay dirt on them claims where the dredge is working is getting better all the time, so it is. One o' these days it'll strike dollar dirt, and then ye'll see auld Cinnabar come back with a rush and a roar."

"Now ain't that somethin'?" Big Bill said thoughtfully. "Pay dirt gettin' better all the time, huh? Dollar dirt, hm-m-m. All right, Pat. Take yore old pan and hop aboard that hoss and git back to yore job."

"I want me bottle, Big Bill," Pat demanded.

"That's the trouble with you now. You've had too much bottle. Scram!"

Slim and Big Bill ranged themselves on either side of their befuddled partner and assisted him into the saddle. They cautioned him to hang on to the horse's mane for dear life, and watched him head for the dredge. When they returned to the

cabin, Big Bill lifted Pat's bottle off the table and held it high.

"Here's to the future of Cinnabar," he said, and took a long pull at the liquor.

The partners were astir earlier than usual the following morning. They rounded up their burros and slapped pack saddles on them. Then they divided their gold dust equally, allowing for Pat's twenty dollars.

"Slim," Big Bill said solemnly, "you'll take in Manzanita, Quartz and Monte Vista, and keep a still tongue in yore head. Me, I'll drift around to Juniper, Gold Hill and Placerville. That just about takes in the hull blamed country, don't it?"

"Just about," Slim agreed. "And it's gonna be some job."

"And some gamble," Big Bill added. "Well, so long, pard. I'll be seein' you later."

DUSK was fast descending on the hills when Slim Weston next appeared in the ghost camp at the heels of his burro. About all of the little animal that could be seen were his long ears and tiny hoofs, the rest of him hidden under a canvas-covered pack that bulged like a partly inflated balloon.

Slim drove the tired burro past his cabin and into the Last Drink Saloon, where he unpacked it and carried the stuff into the cellar. Big Bill came along a few minutes later, his burro similarly packed, and joined his partner.

"Well, how's that for a start?" Slim inquired, flicking the sweat from his brow with a gnarled finger.

"Swell," Big Bill said enthusiastically. "Hope the end'll be the same."

Each day the same mysterious trips were made until each man had covered his allotted territory. Then the partners returned to their prospecting. However, a certain nervous tension had settled upon them, which was quite alien to their usual happy-go-lucky natures.

"It's gotta happen today, Big Bill," Slim worriedly observed one morning at breakfast, "or else Mel Dugard's gonna have the laugh on us. Tomorrow's the sale."

"You tellin' me?" Big Bill growled, and thereafter they fell silent.

Next morning Sheriff Lige Luton rode into Cinnabar bright and early. Later on came a string of wagons, buggies and riders. For the first time since the placer claims had petered out and the camp had been deserted Cinnabar was showing some of its old-time bustle. Horses were soon unhitched or unsaddled and tied to sagging hitch rails. Men, women and even children congregated in groups, talking, gesticulating, shaking hands with old friends. Some started on a tour of the creeking cabins and false-fronted buildings until they came to the Last Drink Saloon. There Slim and Big Bill stood guard, allowing no one to enter.

Melvin Dugard strutted about like a peacock, taking particular care, however, to keep close to the sheriff and away from the two prospectors who glowered at him when they caught sight of him.

"We'd better not hang around here any longer, Slim," Big Bill whispered to his partner. "Folks might git suspicious. Let's nail up the door."

On the stroke of ten the sheriff mounted the steps of what had once been the post office. The throng surged close. Mel Dugard elbowed his way through until he stood directly in front of the sheriff.

"Ladies and gents," the lawman

sang out, "this here camp of Cinnabar now goes under the hammer. The county's got a claim of nine hundred bucks agin' the property for back taxes."

"Suppose the bidding goes above that amount, what then?" Mel Dugard asked.

"Any surplus reverts to the property owners," the sheriff explained, "provided same is alive and kin be found."

"That don't sound so good," Slim whispered to his partner. "That weasel's gonna kite his bids."

"You leave the biddin' to me," Big Bill told him. "That runt's just runnin' a bluff, is all."

"What am I bid, gents?" the sheriff asked.

"Nine hundred and fifty bucks," Mel Dugard sang out in a piping voice. A chorus of boos greeted the bid, but after that the crowd fell silent. A voice raised it to a thousand, and Mel droned, "And ten." Those two words became a monotonous refrain as the bidding progressed.

The bidders slowly dropped out, leaving a clear field to Mel Dugard and Big Bill Harris.

"I'm no ten-spot piker, sheriff," the latter shouted. "Make it fifteen hundred bucks!"

Dugard's jaw dropped and he turned around to stare at Big Bill with a trace of worry in his glance.

Great excitement began running through the crowd now. Dugard turned back to the sheriff. "And ten," he droned.

"Sixteen hundred, sheriff," Big Bill laughed. But his laughter lacked mirth.

The color drained from Mel Dugard's face.

"Come on, gents," the sheriff urged. "Sixteen hundred bucks bid. Do I hear seventeen?"

"Seventeen," Mel Dugard piped weakly.

"And ten," Big Bill roared, taking a leaf out of Dugard's book. The crowd began laughing and shouting, and some of the men nearest Big Bill slapped him encouragingly on the back.

In the midst of the tumult, Mel Dugard slunk away through the crowd, and the sheriff's gun butt rapped hollowly against the side of the building.

"Ladies and gents," he announced, "Cinnabar goes to Big Bill Harris for the sum of seventeen hundred and ten bucks. Going, going, *gone!*"

The spectators gathered around Big Bill, cheering at the top of their lungs. As the excitement died down, most hitched up their horses and made ready to return home. The sheriff elbowed a path to Big Bill's side.

"Let's go to yore cabin and settle up," he suggested.

"Leapin' bullfrogs, I wish I was somewhere else!" Slim muttered.

The sheriff went ahead, and Big Bill and Slim trailed along behind him, their faces worried.

WHEN they entered the cabin, Big Bill took one helpless look at his partner. He moistened his lips before speaking.

"Lige," he began uncomfortably, "I ain't got seventeen bucks to my name, leave alone seventeen hundred. Y'see, I was expectin'—that is, we was expectin'—er—"

"What!" the sheriff thundered. "Say, feller, what sort of a razzle-dazzle are you tryin' to pull on me? You savvied that this was to be a cash sale. Yet you—"

"You'd 'a' did the same thing,

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ARIZONA RANGER

by JAY LUCAS

Part Seven

Arizona Ranger

The Story So Far:

WHEN Tex Fletcher, notorious rustler, makes his escape from the Arizona Rangers who had captured him after a long campaign, it seems evident that it was with the help of Lieut. Clint Yancey, who is expelled from the organization in disgrace.

Clint joins Fletcher's gang, with the secret intention of trapping the leader and bringing him to justice. On the first raid in which he participates Clint sees an example of Tex's treachery when the leader, in order to save himself, sacrifices three of his own men.

On his return to Gulch City, Clint is arrested by Sergeant Wilson, but escapes in the desert. He returns to the outlaw town, only to have Tex attempt to get him killed. However, six of Tex's men side Clint and flee with him by night.

Clint and his half-a-dozen men steal a huge herd from one of Tex's cattlemen friends and sell it for a high price to a Mexican who had been cheated by the rustler chief. They return to Gulch City in triumph, and the success of their raid brings half of Tex's men over to Clint's side.

With forces equally divided, it seems a deadlock, until Tex fails in an attempt to blow up Clint's men in an old theater building. A fire, started by the explosion, spreads through the town. The men are so furious at Tex's treachery that Clint is able to persuade them to help him take Tex's gang prisoners and deliver them to the rangers, with the hope that they will thereby be able to earn pardons for themselves.

But although all of Tex's men are captured, the leader, having deserted them, escapes. Clint goes out into the desert after him, certain that the search will mean death for one of them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MEETING

TWO men staggered up the side of a butte, leading gaunt horses that they could no longer ride. The horses were weaker than the men themselves. The sun was beginning to set but it still burned their backs with scorching rays.

"I tell you," Butch croaked argumentatively through swollen, cracked lips, "he only went up here to see if he could look back an' see us. He knowed you'd follow him."

Clint looked at him with bleared eyes.

"We got to stick to his trail. See the queer places he found water, this last couple of days. Or is it three days we been out, Butch?"

Butch stopped to rest, leaning against the still scorching wall of rock. He wagged his grizzled head, puzzled.

"I thought it was four—I dunno. Uh-huh, he found the water, an' ruined every hole after him so's we'd have none. Hell!" he burst out. "What wouldn't I give for one teeny thimbleful o' dirty water, to rensh my mouth out with!"

There was a crack circling up the side of the rock, and they were following it, although they could see no hoofprints there. And Clint had insisted on circling the whole butte to make sure that there was but one trail entering and one leaving, so that Tex could not be lying up there to ambush them.

Clint, who was leading, stopped and stared at something lying in the middle of their path. The body of a coyote, not dead a day. Its mouth was open and its tongue hung out, black and swollen.

"Got caught out here. No water."

Butch only blinked at the dead animal. Talking was too much effort. They went slowly up and up, until at last they came out on the flat place on the summit. Butch's eyes nearly popped out.

"W-water! A spring!"

They stared at each other. It could not be true! Why should

there be a clear spring up here? And why had Tex not destroyed it? But then a spring is not so easily destroyed as a tiny waterhole that would be dry until the next heavy rain.

"Huh!"

Clint followed Butch's eyes. Stretched there was the skeleton of a man, and around it other skeletons. And there were twisted pack saddles, and other equipment.

"Prospector," said Butch. "Got here some time when it was dry."

They dropped the reins of the horses and hurried forward. At the edge of the water, they could see the prints where Tex had knelt to drink —prints of knees, of boot toes, and of fingers. Butch grinned.

"Here's lookin' at you, Clint!"

But his grin ended in a wince, and he raised his hand to his mouth. It came away bloody. His lower lip had cracked open. Thirsty though he was, he drew back with a smothered groan from the tiny spring. He would not get blood in the water until Clint had drunk first. Clint stooped quickly, so that Butch would not have long to wait.

"Lucky we found it," Butch mumbled almost hysterically. "Couldn't make it to any other water. Thought we was done for."

CLINT'S lips almost touched the water. Already in imagination it was trickling down his throat, the sweetest liquid he had ever tasted. And suddenly he jerked. He paused an instant as though undecided. And then he stood up, shoved Butch away as he stooped quickly to drink.

"It's—a poison spring!" he gasped.

Butch sat back on his haunches, horror on his face.

"Hu-how you know?"

"That dead coyote—an' the prospector an' his burros."

"But—Tex drank! I'm goin' to drink it! Hell, man, I'm thirsty, an' I'm goin' to—"

He was almost babbling, a wild light in his eyes. He stooped again. Clint seized his shoulder and flung him away, and he fell on his back.

"Have sense, man!" Clint snapped it. "He didn't drink. He left those marks to fool us, to get rid of us."

Butch sat up. He put his arms around his knees, and stared broodingly down into that limpid water.

"No, we can't let Tex fool us, Clint. We won't die of his poisoned water—we'll thirst to death!"

And Butch laughed wildly, rocking back and forth. Partly, Clint knew, it was the fever that comes with such thirst as theirs. But partly it was stubbornness, Butch's dogged fighting spirit. That heavy, middle-aged man had ridden beside him, plugged along on foot beside him through the sand, with never a grumble. Butch looked over now at Clint, his eyes bloodshot and shrunken, but without the light of craziness in them—yet.

"Clint, we can prove it. Let the horses drink."

Clint had been holding them back. He shook his head.

"Let 'em drink, Clint, Butch insisted. "We got to shoot 'em anyways. We couldn't let the pore critters thirst to death. Only we can do that!" And Butch laughed again. He was not far from the breaking point.

Slowly they stood up. They pulled off saddles and bridles. With rolling eyes, the horses threw themselves toward the spring. They drank and drank as if they would never have their fill. But at last

they turned away. The two men stood watching them. They went a few feet off, and one reached his lips tentatively toward a little patch of yellowish-green brush. But he stopped, raised his head, and looked out into the growing darkness. He twitched, staggered. And then his back humped up and he moaned. The men waited a few moments more, to be sure, and then their guns came out. Two shots rang out in the desert quiet.

"Well, Clint, we don't drink—can't give Tex the satisfaction. Oh, but that feller knows the desert!" Butch looked at him. "Ten dollars, pardner, to shoot me, too."

His heart heavy, Clint peered into those shrunken, red-rimmed eyes in that lined face. He looked a long time, and sighed in relief. What he saw was not madness but a faint twinkle.

"Butch, you're all right!"

"Shore I am—so're you, Clint. Well, let's go. I hope we pass out where that rat can't find our bones, to laugh at like he does at pore Carmody's."

THEY went to their saddles and began to untie the little packs behind the cantles, their dwindling little hoard of food—they had rationed themselves to a mouthful or two a day. A man can go long without food, but not without water. And then Butch heard Clint's voice. It sounded strangely quickly and eager.

"Butch! You've seen saddle-blanket whiskey that Mexicans make back in the mountains."

"So you got it now!" sighed Butch, and added harshly, "Clint! Come out of it, dang yore hide!"

"No, Butch! I mean steaming whiskey up into a saddle blanket, an' then wringing the blanket out. It's a kind of still. There's a few sticks to make a fire, and the prospector's gold pan to boil water—"

Butch sat back on his haunches, his swollen mouth open.

"You mean— But would it get the poison out?"

"One way to find out," said Clint quietly.

All through the night they slept in turn, the one awake gathering little sticks, breaking up the bleached pack saddles, using their own stirrups, and pausing often to wring out that damp saddle blanket stretched above the steaming pan. When daylight came, there was no more wood. Their lips had shrunken almost to normal size and their faces seemed to have filled out slightly—but there was only a tablespoonful or two of liquid in the pan.

"Butch!"

"Huh?"

"The hills—the range country! See it 'way off there?"

"Do we quit—or keep on?" Butch would not even offer a suggestion.

Clint thought a few moments.

"Butch, you go in there. I'm keeping after him. In case—in case—uh—I don't come back, you might tell the rangers I was after Tex. They'll know then I didn't double-cross 'em."

Butch picked up one pack and threw it over his shoulder.

"Aw, come on! I said I was stickin'."

"But, Butch, they *have* to know! Man, that's all I've been working for all the time—to clear my name, and the rangers. It's my job, not yours. And if you won't tell 'em, you're no friend of mine."

"I think I savvy, Clint," Butch said quietly. "And you'll live as long without me. Longer. You take all this grub an' water. And,"

he grinned, "don't swaller it all at once an' founder yoreself."

"No, we split it. It's a long way to—"

"Aw, shut up! You gimme a pain."

They went together to the foot of the butte. There they paused, reluctant to part.

"Think you can make it in, Butch?" Clint said huskily.

Butch nodded. "Wish you didn't have to go no farther, Clint. Hell, but it's gittin' hot already! Well, good luck to you, pardner."

"Give my regards to Sally—an' the boys. Adios."

Clint turned. He could see the hoof tracks of Tex's mount winding off into the sand.

Next day he found Tex's dead horse. The wheeling buzzards led him to the place, and saved him four or five miles of tracking. The ground was black with the bloated creatures. They flapped heavily upward as he approached. He could not look at them. He did not like to think now of buzzards, those scavengers of the desert.

He went to the horse. There was a piece of skin hanging down from a thigh, and the straight edge showed a knife cut. So Tex had provided himself with meat. Why had not he and Butch thought of that? But this stuff now, lying twenty-four hours or more in the scorching sun, fouled by turkey buzzards— He turned off, averted his eyes from the birds hopping out of his way, and plugged grimly on. Now there were not hoofprints before him, but boot tracks. This was better.

THAT evening he found where Tex had piled dry sand into a tiny waterhole at which he had drunk. Scraping with his bare hands, Clint found bedrock four feet down. There was a little bowl-shaped hollow in the rock. He thrust his handkerchief into that, and once in a while removed it, to suck it. He slept, and when his blistering mouth woke him up at two in the morning, the little hollow had seeped almost full.

With his hands, he scooped up enough to half fill his canteen, and the rest he mopped up with his handkerchief, to squeeze it into his mouth. In the starlight, he found those tracks and started walking again. During the night, he crossed an old trail that Tex had made a day or two earlier, with his own trail and Butch's over it.

In blazing noon sunlight, he saw the trail gradually come closer to a wash it had run beside. It turned into it and did not go out the other side. Clint followed the stones of the wash a hundred yards or more, and stopped suddenly. This was too plain a trail for such a place! Twice he had found faint prints of boot heels. He stood there, staring at the hot stones.

And suddenly words pounded through his head: *"Clint, can you leave a false trail on the desert?"* That was what Tex had said when he showed him the bleached bones of poor Ranger Carmody.

Clint turned back. He passed the place where he had entered the wash. He went a hundred yards, two hundred—not a trace of a trail. He kept on, almost half a mile. Now he was bent over, examining the stones one by one. At last he found a faint white scratch on one; a nail in a boot heel must have done it. On he went for half an hour more, and there was a toe mark where sand had blown in a thin film across a flat stone. It was hardly noticeable. He kept on.

Suddenly he stopped again. He did not know which way Tex had gone. There was no way to be sure. Tex, the poker player, the expert gambler and judge of men—how smart had he judged him, Clint, to be? It all depended on that. All he had left was to outguess Tex, to try to read his mind better than Tex could read his.

Clint laughed queerly. He raised his canteen, let the last few drops trickle down his throat. He started to dash the canteen away, but paused, hung the strap gravely over his shoulder. He turned, and went shuffling back as he had come, back past where he had entered the wash. He was too tired even to glance at his own trail where it entered.

Miles, miles, miles. Another day, but he might have been walking a million years. The wash was gradually growing smaller. And it had led into the very heart of the desert. Not a track in it, not a sign of anyone's having come this way. And a man could not possibly have gone this far without leaving at least another white scratch on a stone. He had guessed wrong. Tex was the smarter. But it was now too late to turn back. He would drop before he had got halfway to the nearest water back that way.

That night he slept on a patch of sand in the wash. He was too tired to climb the foot or two out—the wash was very small now. It was far past midnight when he lay down, and he was up at dawn. He had half a dry biscuit, and he ate it. Not that he was hungry any more, or even thirsty. The queer thing was how the desert about him seemed to heave in waves like the ocean. Sometimes it waltzed halfway around him and then slowly came back.

He fell once, and lay laughing. It seemed so funny to fall down. But he got up. He shook his fist at a buzzard that was wheeling not fifty yards above his head, but he laughed at it, too.

"Hello, Tex! Won't be long now—you can eat me, Tex! You buzzard! Why, Tex, damn you, you—"

He started. Mona Fernel was listening, and here he was starting to swear! Finest woman God ever put on earth, Mona Fernel. He had not seen her in ages until now. He twisted his head to look at her, and the buzzard swooped by. Perhaps it was that evil bird's closeness that brought him to his senses. He wiped his hand across his eyes, shook his head jerkily, and went on. His feet were dragging.

"Won't be long now, Clint, old boy!" he told himself in a croak, but there was sanity in his voice, and a kind of grim humor.

He was leaving the head of the wash. And suddenly he gave a hoarse shout and ran a few steps weakly. There, under his feet, were the tracks of moccasins! That was why there were no scratches of boot heels. Tex had carried these moccasins for just such a trick. Perhaps he had used them when he led Ranger Carmody to his death.

Now he was walking almost fast, though sometimes he lurched to one side or the other. He did not notice that he had dropped his canteen. At noon he was still lurching on. A little pile of barren boulders lay ahead, thrusting themselves out of the sand. As he had done in all this mad, weary chase, he swung out wide around them, to pick up the trail at the far side. It was merely habit with him now, and did not call for thought.

Continued on page 109

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

If any readers want to know more about settling in this new country of cut-over land, write John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope, for further information.

NED RAYBURN, of Clutier, Iowa, writes, "I work in town, but I'd like to get out into the wilds and get started on a little place of my own; say, some cheap land somewhere that would give a man a chance to start without much capital and make a living for himself as he goes along. I've heard of the cut-over timberland, which companies sell for very little money after they have taken the timber off it. I understand there is a lot of this in Minnesota. Can you tell me something about it?"

I surely can tell you something about it, Ned. And I want to tell you first that you have a good idea and should follow it up.

Minnesota gets pretty cold in winter, but against this there is the fact that the summers have very long days, and so the crops mature fast because they get a lot of sunlight during the growing season. And also the soil is very rich on this cut-over land and can be had cheap. It is a great country for diversified farming, and by mixing

your activities to include dairying, livestock raising, poultry, fruits and vegetables, you are sure to do well every year.

The northern half of the State is the part you want to investigate. The other sections are pretty well filled up with fine big farms and dairies, but the northern part has long been in timber.

As this timber is cut off, the land is left with small trees and stumps which are of no value to the timbermen, who of course don't want to farm it. So they sell it. Therefore, as a farming community, this part of the State has only recently been developed, and most necessities are not too expensive.

As the trees come off, this ground is found to be extra fertile. It is good for dairying and poultry raising, raises bumper crops of potatoes, running up to two hundred bushels per acre, supports hogs and turkeys in abundance. And it is mighty fine for corn and all kinds of berry crops and feed crops.

Of course, one of the first things you have to do is stump your land. And here is where the man with no money gets a big break. If people everywhere had a chance like this to get started there would be a wonderful improvement in conditions everywhere, and nobody would have to go without a home of his own.

The county will furnish you with the dynamite to blow your stumps, and give you work to earn it instead of paying cash for it. The system works this simple way: If it costs you anywhere up to twenty dollars an acre to clear your land, the county will give you enough work, up to twenty dollars, for every acre of your land that you clear. In other words I may want to clear an acre of my land, and know that it will cost me twenty dollars.

I go to the county and get twenty dollars' worth of work to do, and with that money I clear my acre of land. I haven't spent any of my capital, and I haven't asked charity from anybody. I did honest work to earn the money to improve my place.

While this is the paradise of the small farmer just getting his start, it is well supported by some other heavy industries in the neighborhood, and thus differs, in having at hand a good market, from some new country that is very isolated. In the farming towns around there, they have public markets where the farmers rent space if they want it for ten dollars a year, and sell most of their produce direct to the consumer, getting the highest prices possible.

If you're going to raise a family, you will find good schools and good roads. Busses come along and pick up your children and take them to and return them from schools, and the roads are kept open all winter.

So, Ned, there's your place. If you haven't much money, get that county work to clear your land, build a fifty-dollar cabin on it, buy a cow, borrow a mule and plow, and get busy. In a few years you'll have a farm home that will make you secure for life.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

MINES AND MINING

By

J. A. THOMPSON

If you would like to know more about elementary geology in connection with practical prospecting, why not drop John Thompson a letter or card telling him so? If a sufficient number of readers are interested in learning more about this fascinating subject, Mr. Thompson will be glad to devote more space to it in a forthcoming issue.

A LITTLE knowledge of rocks in general—geology—is a decidedly useful asset to the practical prospector. The good old days when any sort of book learning was loudly derided by the metal hunter have disappeared together with the covered wagons and the buffalo. Too many prospectors have seen apparent miracles worked by modern geologists in tracing lost ore bodies or relocating faulted veins by a close study of the geology of the surrounding rocks.

"I always figured that what a fellow knew about any business he was interested in never hurt him," writes E. H., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. "And I am sure interested in prospecting. Been following your articles for a long time and learned lots from them. But wonder if there are not some beginners like myself who would appreciate a little information about rocks themselves. What the main kinds are, and which of them could be most reasonably expected to carry metals like gold and silver and so forth. You have made understandable so many other technical things about mining and prospecting that I would appreciate it if you could bring the principles of geology down to earth for a plain bird like myself."

We'll try, E. H. There is no doubt that big words and highbrow phraseology have done a lot to make geology confusing to the average person. Yet essentially, the story is not too tough to be understandable.

All rocks are divided into two great classes—stratified and unstratified. The former are sedimentary rocks. They were originally laid down in the form of fine silt or sediment under water. A large portion of the earth is now covered with rocks of this type. The common sedimentary rocks are hard clays, shale, limestone, sandstone and

chalk. Most of these were formed in large beds, or layers—strata is the technical term—and in a nearly horizontal position. When they are found tilted and folded, as they frequently are, it simply means they have been subject since their formation, to severe earth pressure. Railroad cuts and deep river gorges are excellent places to show the bends and folds and different layers of sedimentary rock formations.

The unstratified, or deep-seated rocks on the other hand were formerly molten, or in a semi-molten condition, and are an original part of the material that goes to make up the great unknown interior core of our world. Granite is perhaps the most abundant rock of this type, sometimes whole mountain chains being composed of this single type of unstratified rock. The straight volcanic rocks, lava flows, and eruptive rocks also belong to this class and though unstratified rocks altogether compose probably less than one-tenth of the earth's present land surface, they are generally the most important to the prospector because most metallic minerals come originally from deep down in the bowels of the earth carried either as molten masses or in solutions.

Masses of molten rock that have been forced into or between other formations, either sedimentary or unstratified, are called intrusions and it is in or near them that most favorable sources of metallic ore deposition are found.

There is another half-and-half class of rocks—the metamorphic—which may be formed from sedimentaries or unstratified rocks by the action of intense heat, pressure, or other internal earth forces. For instance limestone, a sedimentary rock, may be changed to marble, a metamorphic rock.

With that basic groundwork of all rock formations sketched out, let's come to veins which are actual, direct carries of most of the valuable metallic ores. As found in nature, rocks, particularly in mountainous areas, are not huge masses of solid, consistent composition. They are generally seamed, cracked, and scarred with veins, or streaks of a material differing from the main mass. These veins are accumulations of mineral substances that have filled in the cracks or been forced into weak places in the rock structure.

Veins may be large or small, extensive or short. The contents of veins carrying metal (not all of them do by any means), are the gangue, or vein material itself (very commonly quartz), and the metallic ore. Some veins are almost solid ore. Others contain only a small percent of actual metal.

To George T., Birmingham, Alabama: Iodine is not mined in the usual sense of the word. Most of this country's output is obtained from oil well brines in Los Angeles county, California.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS

OUR first letter this week is a rather unusual one, and one that we're sure will appeal to a great many of you. We all know what a priceless treasure a sympathetic, understanding friend is, a friend to whom we can turn when weighed down by circumstances and pour out our hearts. Well, after reading Edward Biegenzahn's letter it seemed to us that he'd be just such a valued friend if given the opportunity, so we've printed it here for you. Read it and see if you don't agree with us.

Dear Miss Rivers:

The universe, life and living, human beings, points of view—these are with us and life moves on to what end, we can but wonder. The world of nature is man's greatest teacher and holds countless classes of worth-while instruction. Here lies my interest. I am a young man twenty-nine years old and one of the questions in which I have always been interested is "the purpose and meaning of life." I have no answer to this question, but to me it is interesting to contemplate. Here and there throughout the world are those to whom life seemingly presents great barriers of loneliness, misunderstanding and soul-destroying hopelessness. I cannot promise to remove these things, but I can encourage one to continue his efforts to overcome them. To those of you who are interested, this is an invitation to write. I shall do the best that human efforts permit to answer all letters. —Edward W. Biegenzahn, Emigrant, Montana

Lots of cheery letters needed here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a girl twenty-five years old and am very lonesome and blue, so could you help me out by getting me some Pen Pals to write to? I would like to hear from males and females from all over the world. Dancing and swimming are my two favorite pastimes.—Gertrude Lambert, 511 E. 27th St., Baltimore Maryland

Private Stitz wants some new acquaintances—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a great admirer of the Holla Tree and have always longed to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. I am in high hopes that I'll be allowed to join your club and make some new acquaintances in this big wide world. My favorite sports are football and tennis, and I'd rather dance than eat. I am twenty-two years old and will exchange snapshots and promise to answer all letters.—Private A. W. Stitz, Medical Detachment, Fort Hayes, Columbus, Ohio

Here are a couple of outdoor girls—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two lonely girls in a large city. We've been reading Western Story Magazine for quite awhile, and we thought it would be swell to get into your Hollow Tree Gang. We promise faithfully to answer all letters whether from male or female, old or young. As for us, we are both seventeen and crazy about sports. We simply dote on roller skating, swimming and skiing. Right now we want our mailboxes filled.—Betty Champion and Eleanor Durgan, 3814 Densmore Avenue, Seattle, Washington

Be careful, this New Zealander is out a-gunnin'—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young New Zealand farmer boy out a-gunnin' for some cowpuncher Pen Pals, so will you please help me out? I will answer all letters.—Frank R. Lord, Tawaha, Martinborough, Wairarapa, North Island, New Zealand

Jewell is another Oklahoma miss—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Won't you let one more lonesome girl from Oklahoma enter your friendly corner? I am twenty years old and since my father's death I have been very lonely. I am the oldest of seven children. My favorite sports are horseback riding and swimming and I love to dance. I also enjoy reading and collecting photos of scenes and people. The town I live in is not very large, but I will gladly tell anyone who writes to me all about it and will also tell them about some interesting incidents which happened here before Oklahoma became a State. Now won't all you boys and girls from all over

the world just cram my mailbox full of letters?—I'll be waiting for them.—Jewell Bumbalow, Westville, Oklahoma

This South African will swap snaps and post cards—

Dear Miss Rivers:
May I ask for a little room? I am sixteen years old and would like some Pen Pals from all over the world. My hobbies are collecting stamps and snapshots. I will exchange snapshots and post cards with the first fifteen who write to me and I promise to answer all letters. —Hendry Pienaar, "Lutonia," Constantia Road, Dynberg, Cape Province, South Africa

Only girl pals are wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am twenty-three years old and married, and I would like lots of girl Pen Pals from all over the world. My hobbies are collecting stamps and post cards which I will gladly exchange. I also promise to answer all letters.—Marie Rooks, R. F. D. No. 2, Huntington, L. I., New York

Ken is looking for a job on a ranch—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would appreciate it very much if you would print my plea for Pen Pals. I am twenty-four years old, have a good character and am a lover of horses, and a good worker. I would like to find a place on a ranch in the West where I could learn more about raising them. I would also like to have lots of Pen Pals, so come on, all you amigos, and write real soon.—Ken Hagens, R. R. No. 5, Dayton, Ohio

Arline is interested in all facts about foreign countries—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a girl fourteen years old and I would like to have some girl Pen Pals around my age. My hobby is collecting picture post cards. I would like to hear from Pen Pals living all over the world because I love finding out interesting things about other countries and States.—Arline M. Stevens, R. F. D. No. 1, Dudley, Massachusetts

This Canadian Pal can read and write four languages!

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a 1920 model Canadian boy who stepped out of the collegiate into the lonesome blues. Skating, hockey, horseback riding, softball and swimming are my favorite sports. My hobby is collecting snapshots, so will all you who pass the Hollow Tree drop me a snapshot of yourself, autographed? You can write your letters in English, French, Polish, Ukrainian or Russian. I will answer you in whatever language you write, except Russian, so come on, boys and girls, fill my mail box.—Stephen Winston Zerebesky, Orolow, Saskatchewan, Canada

Mildred is lonesome, too—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am very interested in the Hollow Tree and the friendships formed through it. I am twenty-two years old and would like to hear from boys and girls of all ages. My hobbies are collecting picture postcards and souvenirs from all over the United States and elsewhere. Come on, Pen Pals, and write to a lonely Kentucky girl. I will also exchange snapshots.—Mildred Higgins, 3137 Old 3rd Street Road, Louisville, Kentucky

Calling all Pen Pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would appreciate it very much if you would please get me lots and lots of Pen Pals from all over the world. I would like as many as possible and will answer all letters.—David Torre, 381 Summit Avenue, Jersey City, New Jersey

GET THIS FREE

PICTURE OF THE MONTH

Here's your opportunity to obtain FREE a series of colorful framing reproductions of striking *Western Story* covers. Simply fill out and send in together FOUR coupons, each clipped from consecutive issues of *Western Story Magazine*. The Picture of the Month for your latest coupon will be sent. Start now! Clip this coupon and save for your handsome **Picture of the Month** collection.

EDITOR, WESTERN STORY
79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Name..... Age.....

Address.....Feb. 4th issue

Here are the names of the stories I liked best in this issue:

First..... Third.....

Second..... Fourth.....

A Money-Making Opportunity

for Men of Character

EXCLUSIVE FRANCHISE FOR

AN INVENTION EXPECTED TO REPLACE A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR INDUSTRY

Costly Work Formerly "Sent Out" by Business Men Now Done by Themselves at a Fraction of the Expense

This is a call for men everywhere to handle exclusive agency for one of the most unique business inventions of the day.

Forty years ago the horse and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying swept these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made $10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $5 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

Not a "Gadget"— Not a "Knick-Knack"—

but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, $5.83 can be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has Nothing to Do With House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

No Money Need Be Risked

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. *If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded*—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—*that is a necessity* but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—*that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time*—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, *get in touch with us at once* for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, *use the coupon below*—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. *Address*

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Without obligation to me, send me full information on your proposition.

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MISSING DEPARTMENT

KENT, J. W.—He left his brother's home in 1935 and is believed to have gone to some orphans' home. If anyone knows his whereabouts please tell him to write to his brother, Alfred Kent, Rt. No. 3. Box 301, Sacramento, California.

MANN, CECIL—He is my uncle and has not been heard from for several years. I am the daughter of his sister, Olive, who married William Ames. My mother died in 1917 and I cannot find any trace of her relatives. "Uncle Cecil, if you see this, please write to your niece." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts please write to Mrs. Ruthella Hoffman, 537 East Pearl Avenue, Loves Park, Rockford, Illinois.

ZEROTT, RAYMOND—He is the son of Mrs. A. Tompkins and was last heard of in Washington. He is tall and has brown curly hair and is eighteen years old. "Raymond, please write so we will know where you are and what you're doing."—Laura Zerott, Rt. No. 3, Box 183, Princeton, Minnesota.

CLEARY, JAMES F.—He was last heard of in San Diego, California, when he was attached to the U. S. S. *Lavallete*. I would like very much to hear from him, so if anyone knows his whereabouts, please write to "Cookie," care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

ATTENTION—I am trying to locate my five brothers, three of whom I have never seen. Their names are Clarence, Burle, Clyde, Ira and Robert Burnett. Robert may have been adopted and may be using another name. I heard he was somewhere in Kentucky. Our mother was Lucy Mae Johnson, before she married William Brown Burnett. Both parents have been dead a good many years. I was Louise Burnett before I married. Some of my brothers may be in the army. If anyone has any information concerning their whereabouts, please write to me. Or, boys, if you see this, write to your sister, Mrs. J. F. Goodson, Box 963, Goldsboro, North Carolina.

McBRIDE, E. R.—He has been missing since August, 1938. He is thirty-six years old, five feet. eleven and a half inches tall, weighs about one hundred and sixty-five pounds and has light-brown hair and eyes and a light complexion. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please notify his wife, Mrs. E. R. McBride, 109½ South Monroe Street, Spokane, Washington.

McNEIL, ALEXANDER LAWRENCE—He is twenty-eight years old and was last heard from in 1933 at which time he was in California. He is a machinist by trade. His parents would very much like to hear from him so if anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please write to John McNeil, 43 Gritton Avenue, Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada.

BAXTER, BERT—He was an iron and brass molder at one time in a foundry in Fall River, Massachusetts. When last heard from he was in Seattle, Washington. If anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please communicate with Mr. George T. Bowstead, Box 389, Rt. No. 2, Swansea, Massachusetts.

SCHILLING, WILLIAM B.—"Bill, do you remember how you hurt Mom and Pop the time you ran away to Alabama and worked on a cotton plantation? Well, you are breaking their hearts now and neither of them is well. They both pray from morning till night for you to come home. Pop takes care of your guns and dogs. They thought you'd be home to go hunting with Harry. Please come home or get in touch with me." Mrs. Juliet Hiles, 6072 Clover Street, California, Ohio.

LAWLESS, JAMES—He was a cattle rancher and lived in the vicinity of Sturgis, Mead County, South Dakota, in 1888 and 1889. If anyone has any information concerning him, please write to M. Jameson, 1029 Swezy Street, Marysville, California.

HARP, GRADY B.—He is twenty-three years old, has dark-gray eyes, sandy-colored hair and a small scar on his face. He left home four years ago and was last heard from in December, 1937. At that time he was living at C. Y. O. Home, Chicago, Illinois. Believed to be in vicinity of New York City. "Grady, if you see this, please get in touch with your mother. She has been very sick. Frazier is dead and we do not know where your father is. Your mother's address is General Delivery, Blakely, Georgia.—Verna Mae."

BENNETT, MARGARETTE—She lived in the vicinity of Peoria, Illinois, between 1890 and 1895. If she is still living, I wish she would communicate with me. Write to "Howard" in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Arizona Ranger

Continued from page 100

He swung in on the far side of the boulders, far out from them. He swung farther. Why, the trail was not there! It was maddening, to lose Tex thus, after all that chase. He felt like sitting in the hot sand and crying. More and more slowly he went, until at last his own trail showed before him again. So that ended it! Tex had outwitted him! He would lie down there. He could not go another inch.

AND then he raised his head slowly. Tex's trail still went on alone, toward that little pile of rocks. It took it a long time to come to him. Why, Tex was there! He had caught up with him! That thought made him sane again. He waved a hand toward those stones out there. He thought he shouted, but his voice could not have been heard fifty feet off. He saw a man stand up. And he discovered that he could still hear as well as ever.

"Clint, you got me! If I walk up to you, will you shoot it out with me, even draw?"

Now Clint's head had never been clearer in his life. He thought quickly. He could not make a siege of it, for Tex would outlast him. He knew that his voice would not carry that far. He raised both hands to show them empty, and beckoned. He peered in astonishment at the scarecrow figure that came shambling toward him, staggering sometimes.

Tex had always had water, plenty of it, but perhaps little food. No, the explanation was that the man was physically softer, could not stand that eternal walking, walking, walking. Exhaustion had brought him down, not hunger or thirst.

Tex had crossed half the space now. And suddenly Clint remembered. Why, he could not shoot Tex! He had to take him in alive, and turn him over to Captain Donley. A few moments more, and he heard Tex speak again, close to him.

"Yancey, you fool!" he said with an evil chuckle. "Don't yon know I'm the fastest shot in Arizona?"

"Are you, Tex? Well, draw."

There was a grin on Tex's haggard face. He stood poised a moment. He did not try any trick. And then his hand flashed to his right thigh. A gun cracked—just one.

A queer, moaning sound came from Tex's lips. He raised his numb, empty right hand and stared at it. His dazed eyes turned to the man ten feet off. Clint had not only beaten him to the draw, but had picked the tiny, moving mark of the gun jerking out of the holster—and had hit it squarely. It lay shattered six feet off. With a despairing oath, Tex turned and started off in a shambling run. From behind him came a croaking cry.

"Stop, for the Arizona Rangers!"

Clint could get him in the back. Tex stopped. He turned slowly, his hands going up, although there was no need for that, since he had no gun. He saw the weird, emaciated figure before him fumbling with the left side of his shirt, and when Clint's hands came down there was a little badge pinned to the pocket.

"Turn your back, Tex, and put your hands behind you."

Clint was coming on, his gun again drawn and pointed. There was a long wait. It is hard to tie a man and keep a gun in the small of his back with the other hand. But at last it was done.

"Straight ahead, prisoner. Any—any water in those rocks?"

Tex did not answer, but when Clint got there he found a canteen half full. He raised it to his lips, and sipped slowly, a few drops at a time. At last he lowered it by a mighty effort. The whole thing would not have begun to satisfy him.

"Clint, give me a drink, too," Tex pleaded.

Clint surveyed him.

"You don't look in bad shape. You get a spoonful or two tomorrow about noon. Now get going!"

"Which way?"

"You know better than I do. Only remember that if I don't get out of here alive, neither do you. Get going, I say!"

CHAPTER XXIX

POISON WATER

ANOTHER sunset, and two scarecrow figures staggering up to a little seep under a hot ledge of rock. One had his wrists tied behind him. Tex had found water on each of the last two days, so Clint's lips had shrunk almost to normal size, but his dust-caked face was like a skeleton's, his eyes more sunken. With water, his head had begun to clear. It was hunger that weakened him now, and he knew it, although the thought of food was repulsive to him.

"Tomorrow," muttered the figure in front, "you'll have me there."

Clint stared ahead over the desert. He brushed his eyes with the back of his hand, blinked them hard. He was almost blind from that white glare day after day. His eyes came suddenly to a focus for a moment, and he saw a low reddish streak far ahead. It was sunset tingeing the hills.

They hurried eagerly to the seep. Their one canteen had been empty since morning. Tex got there first, and threw himself to his knees. He stooped, his bound hands sticking up behind, and Clint knelt across from him. For a few moments both men were motionless, their lips in the water. At last, Clint, with a sigh, sat back on his heels and wiped his mouth with his hand. Tex had not raised his head yet.

And then Clint stood up slowly, his eyes fixed on the other man. When Tex straightened, Clint stood looking at him a moment, and then he spoke, his voice very quiet.

"Tex, you didn't drink."

No answer, but a gloating, triumphant look came to the dusty face of the other.

"Tex, you've poisoned me! This is poison water!"

Tex threw back his head and laughed mockingly in a cracked tone.

"You'll be dead inside of half an hour, Clint. I told you I was too smart for you. I told you I'd never see the inside of a jail."

"I suppose you know, Tex, that you're going with me?"

Clint touched the butt of his gun. Tex laughed again, weakly, hysterically.

"Think I care? You poor fool! Did you think Tex Fletcher could be brought in alive?"

Suddenly a queer, swimming daze surged through Clint's head, and he staggered. The first twinge. It passed off quickly. He went hurrying around the little pool.

"Lie down, Tex!"

"No!"

"Lie down!"

Clint pushed him over. It was not hard. There was a short strug-

Continued on page 112

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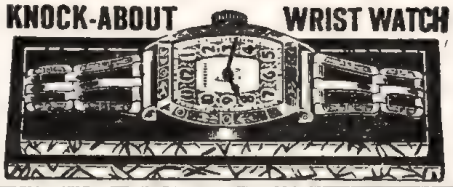

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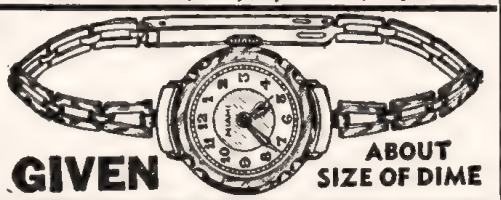

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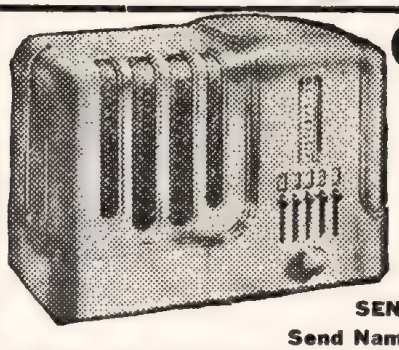

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Continued from page 110

gle, but Clint got Tex's ankles tied together and doubled back up and tied to his wrists. This was how he had always tied him when he slept. It was not humane, but he could not risk having the prisoner escape. Lying there on his side, Tex's eyes rolled wildly. There was horror in them, and a terrible fear. He mumbled brokenly.

"Clint! My God, Clint! You wouldn't leave me this way to starve and thirst to death! The coyotes, Clint! The buzzards! They'll pick my eyes out!"

"No—oh, no! No more than you'd poison me! Lie there, damn you, Tex, and watch me kick till I stop—and then keep on watching me."

The doubled-up figure was babbling now. At last Tex had broken.

"Shoot me, Clint! For God's sake, shoot me!"

Again Clint reeled and almost fell. But he knew that when he did go down for the last time, it had to be far enough away so that Tex could not hunch himself over and work the knife out of his pocket, to free himself. If Clint had been able to think, he would have thrown the knife away, or hidden it in the sand.

CLINT staggered off in a jerky zigzag. He had his hands out before him to break the fall he knew was coming. He found himself on his knees. The whole desert was spinning around him, and something was clutching at his waist like great claws. There, on hands and knees, he stared dumbly into the stunted little bush before his face. He had headed for this bush before he got so bad. Why? What had he to do to this little bush—or with it?

That thick dizziness passed for a moment. He knew it would not be long this time, and that it would be

the last time. Soon he'd fall over on his side. Then bush—that bush!

He remembered! With a queer little moan, he reached out a shaking hand and broke off a twig. A fairly long twig, with small, stiff leaves like feathers up its side. He had to hurry! His head was going again! He jerked the twig up, thrust its tip into his mouth, down his throat. It would not work. He pushed it farther down, twisted it.

And suddenly it had effect. His body twitched, and he fell out on his face, vomiting. He groaned, and lay closer to the stand, retching wildly. Now that it was started, he could not stop it. He flopped to his side, his knees coming almost to his chin as he clutched at his agonized waistline. Without his will, his legs shot straight out, quivering, but in a moment he managed to bring them up again. He was passing into unconsciousness, as the third spasm grasped him.

Sometimes he lay there, stiff and still. Again he would stare up at the swimming stars, and clench his teeth until he almost broke them, trying not to groan. He did not know how long it was, and did not care. Time had no meaning any more. Exhausted, he began to sleep in brief, moaning snatches.

And when dawn came, he was able to get to his feet and lurch across to that wild-eyed figure lying tied in a knot by the poison seep. He was even able to grin weakly—a hard, wild grin.

"Glad to see me alive, Tex? Get up. Right ahead!"

And often as they staggered on through the sand, Clint would stop and double his body. He ached fiercely from his scalp to his toes. His system was rotten with that poison. The sun of the desert blazed down on him, and sometimes he stood shivering in an icy chill, his teeth chattering. Once when he fell he got up and laughed crazily in his prisoner's face.

"I think you got me all right, Tex. But I'll get you in before it happens! I win, Tex!"

THAT night Captain Donley sat on the porch of the little hotel, talking sadly to Ranger Clayton.

"Yes, the House passed the bill, and it'll go through the Senate tomorrow—the end of the Arizona Rangers. I was hoping we had a chance, with so many of the Silvermines gang in jail, but it was Tex they were howling for, the main one."

Clayton looked gloomily at the red tip of his cigarette, glowing in the darkness.

"It's the devil! If they'd only given us a chance! But it's poor Yancey I'm thinking about—the best ranger of us all, and we—" He sighed heavily, shook his head.

"But all the evidence was against him." Donley turned in his chair and spoke sadly, "Clayton, it nearly kills me to think of poor Yancey lying out there on the desert, his bones bleaching. If he could only have lived to know that we'd reinstated him when we saw that gang he sent in!"

They sat there a long time in silence. At last Donley got up and put his pipe into his pocket. His thick shoulders sagged and his head was low. Without a word, he started toward the door to go in. But he heard a sound down the street, and paused to glance toward it.

Two figures were staggering toward him up the dusty street. They were clinging to each other, it seemed. One fell, and the other, mumbling thickly, helped him up

and shoved him on. They both fell getting onto the board sidewalk, and again one helped the other up. They lurched against a wall, and came staggering on. Donley himself was a strict teetotaler. He swore disgustedly.

"Why doesn't the marshal keep them off the street?" And then, more loudly, "You fellows get home quick or I'll run you in—whether it's my business or not!"

The two had stopped opposite the porch, and from the darkness came a harsh croak—the voice started twice before it got off to a good start.

"Captain—Donley. Lieutenant Yancey reporting—with a prisoner for—"

Both were falling then. Donley leaped across the porch, from it to the sidewalk, and Clayton sprang down beside him. They were too late. The figures were sprawled in the dust. With a shaking hand, Clayton struck a match and held it close to the face of the taller man lying there.

"Tex Fletcher!"

A babble came from the ground.

"Captain Donley. Ranger—reports—poison water!" And the voice rose feverishly. "Ma'am, you *have* to eat—that biscuit! A biscuit will—"

"Rangers! Out!"

At the cry, feet came running down the hotel stairs, up the sidewalk. Others than rangers were hurrying up, too, to see what the excitement was about. There were shouts of amazement.

"Yancey! He brought Tex in!"

"Easy with him!" roared Donley. "Upstairs. Call a doctor! Get a doctor, damn it!" And he himself went running down the sidewalk with clanking spurs.

CLINT opened his eyes and looked around. It was puzzling to find himself between white sheets. He saw the grim, hard-bitten face of Ranger McNeil. Mac turned quickly in his chair, and the hardness vanished from his thin features.

"Come awake at last, old-timer? How you feeling?"

"Uh—fine. Did—did I bring Tex in last night?"

McNeil gave him a sympathetic grin.

"Well, not exactly. That was a week ago Tuesday."

Somebody was lumbering around the bed from the other side, and the heavy features of Butch Tolleson came into view. It struck Clint as an odd sight to see ranger and rustler look happily at each other, and then turn to him.

"Hello, Butch. They—didn't lock you up?"

"Me? Heck, me an' the rangers is pals. They let the whole caboodle of us out on our own—uh—somethin' or other, till our trials. I wrote to the other boys to come in an' give up an' it would be all right."

McNeil glanced cautiously toward the doorway, and lowered his voice.

"This isn't supposed to get out, but the governor himself came down a couple of days ago. Those friends of yours are pretty near sure to be turned loose by any jury, after what they did, and coming in and giving up. If any of them are sentenced"—he looked around again—"I think we can arrange for pardons." And he winked at Butch.

"Some of 'em," added Butch, "want to jine the rangers."

"Billy Armour?"

"Uh-huh, he's one of 'em. Funny, to think of my Sal married to a ranger!" Butch chuckled. He had on a new black suit and looked al-

most like a clergyman. "But," he added, "they can't be took in right now. Things is kinda upset. Captain Donley resigned to take another gov'mint job, an' the new captain ain't got here yet."

"New captain? Who is he?" asked Clint eagerly. That was good news. It meant that the rangers were not to be disbanded.

McNeil looked disconcerted. He hesitated.

"We-ll, you weren't supposed to know till you're up and well again. You are, Captain Yancey." He chuckled. "That big wallapus of a Wilson made us all sign a petition to the governor, said he'd kill us all by hand if we didn't. That's really why the governor came down, to see about the thing personally."

Clint was so surprised that he could not answer. He lay staring from McNeil to Butch.

"When Wilson heard you were lost on the desert, he tried to start out to look for you, alone." The ranger went on: "It would have been suicide, and Donley wouldn't let him. So all he did was knock Donley clear over his desk, and then nearly kill three of us that tried to hold him. Took six men to get handcuffs on him and lock him up. To keep him, we charged him with everything from attempted mayhem on up. Poor devil! He sat on the floor of his cell and cried like a baby, because we wouldn't let him go hunt his pardner."

Clint started to say something, but didn't. He turned his head on the pillow and blinked the moisture out of his eyes. Maybe it was only weakness that caused it.

"But of course we let him out as soon as you got here. He stole Captain Donley's horse—the fastest in town—and lit out with all of us after him. But he outrun us and got away."

"Huh!" gasped Clint. "Gone bronco!"

"No. We found out after that he was only rushing to get you a good nurse. We already had a specialist wired for from Tucson. That big idiot has more sense than we thought. You began to pick up as soon as the nurse got here. It was touch and go before that. Here she comes now with your soup."

THERE was a light step in the hall, and for some reason Butch and the ranger got up hurriedly and went out without even saying good-by. Clint heard them speak in low voices to the nurse as they passed. He was getting drowsy again, but it vaguely surprised him to see that the girl in the doorway was not in white but in dark blue. He opened his eyes. And they met another pair of eyes—great, brown ones.

"Mona!"

He was sitting up in the bed, staring in disbelief. She hastily set down the tray and ran to him.

"Oh, you must lie down, Clint! You're sick!"

She helped him back, arranged the pillows. He had got control of himself by this time.

"Thank you, Mrs. Fernel," he said very politely and respectfully.

Her face flushed. She bit her lip. She turned away, and turned back again.

"Clint, you—you were talking a lot while you had fever."

"You mean—"

She nodded, and red crept up to Clint's face. Then she was placing an old letter in his hands. It had a Mexican stamp on the envelope.

"Clint, I think you—might like to

see this—should see it."

Clint could read Spanish as quickly as English. The short letter dropped to the covers. He heard Mona speak in her quiet, grave voice.

"I found it on Jim after he was killed. Jim and I had never—got along very well, but I thought he—When I saw this, I nearly went mad, to think that I'd been living with a man like that. That was why I—acted so queerly."

Clint lay there in a daze, not knowing what to say. Mona smiled at him.

"And—you were the most perfect gentleman I ever saw, even if you were an outlaw. And I—"

She stopped, blushed. After all, a man must speak first. What he has said in delirium doesn't count.

Clint could not believe that anybody could be so beautiful as this tall, grave brown-eyed girl. He could see that she was waiting. Both his trembling hands went out and closed on one of hers.

They were sitting thus when Sergeant Wilson came stealing down the hall, hardly making more noise than an elephant. He paused in the doorway, tried to meet Clint's eye and could not.

"Clint, are you—uh—very sore at me, for bein' such a damn fool? Uh—I mean, Captain Yancey."

Clint grinned at him weakly.

"Sure I am, you big wallapus. I'll beat your block off when I get up."

Wilson let out a gasp of relief that sounded like a spouting whale, and three heavy leaps brought him to the bedside. He took the one free hand held up to him.

"Why, pardner!"

"Uncle, you must not excite the patient," Mona broke in gently. "Would you mind running down to the post office to get the mail—or something?"

"Huh! Oh, you mean I'm in the way." He stared at Clint's other hand, holding Mona's.

"Yes—Uncle John," said Clint softly. "You can see me later—Uncle John."

"Uncle—" Wilson scratched his head. He looked indignant. Then suddenly it dawned on him. "You mean— Lord, but I'm always buttin' in where I have no business. Well—uh—congratulations, both of you."

He tripped over one of his own spurs as he hurried through the door, but neither of the two in the room even heard him, though he landed on the floor with the sound of an earthquake.

THE END

Cow Horses

Continued from page 78

under a saddle. A horse without some thoroughbred in him is no horse at all, and the more "hot" blood he has, the better he is bound to be.

And the Steeldust faction says that a thoroughbred is not a cow horse, and never will be, while the "native" is the world's best, and any statement to the contrary is gotten out by a lot of propagandists who are trying to promote the sale of thoroughbreds to the unsuspecting public.

Just one of those arguments that make the cow and horse business interesting, folks.

THE END.

The Race With The Noose

Continued from page 88

done a decent thing. Tell him his father . . . done . . . one decent thing! Tell him—" He almost fell then, but getting a grip on himself he gasped. "Tell him his father was . . . *San Sabe!*"

"But you!" cried the girl. "Where are you going?"

His hand moved in a vague gesture. "Anywhere . . . away from here. . . . So they'll . . . follow me. And won't find . . . *him.*"

He took a lurching step toward the horse and fell—and knew no more.

SOUNDS, as from a great distance, broke into San Sabe's consciousness. He heard the musical lapping of water, the crackle of a campfire, the unforgettable drawl of the emigrant Davis.

"We're pullin' out soon as all hands is able to travel. Mighty white outfit, them possemen. Soon as I told 'em th' fix we was in, they like to fell over themselves givin' me a team."

A girl's anxious voice said, "They've gone then?"

"Plumb gone. Headed back for Texas with th' hosses."

"Thank Heaven! I've been most crazy for fear they'd come down here—"

"You needn't have worried, gal. They figgered they made a clean sweep. They got th' headman, Dagget, an' one other down by th' river. Th' little coyote feller tried to run, but he didn't get far. San Sabe done for th' fourth in makin' his getaway, after takin' my part up there. An' th' posse told me they got San Sabe in th' river. They never seen Reck. Never knew he was with th' outfit."

Slowly San Sabe's eyes opened, and over him he saw the white canvas of a tent, laced by the shadows of willows, patterned by sun. And

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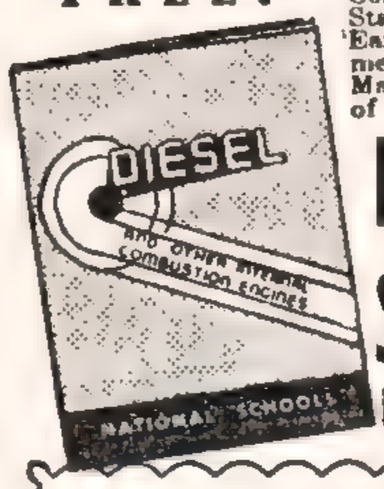

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in the door of the tent stood the girl he'd thought was Nan.

Seeing him stir, she came up to his cot, laying a cool hand on his forehead. "You're awake?" she said.

His lips twisted in a semblance of a smile. "I ain't sure. How did I get here?"

"We carried you here when you fell on the river bank. Remember? You're hurt—bad. But you'll get well."

"Reck?" his haggard eyes asked the question he could not utter.

And from the other side of his cot, a familiar voice answered, "Here, San Sabe—dad!"

Turning slightly, San Sabe saw Reck, pale from his ordeal, a bandage about his head, but otherwise just as he'd seen him first on the Saddleback.

He whispered in a choked voice, "You called me—*dad!*"

"Sure! Reckon I must have come to about the time Betty here pulled us out of the water. Anyhow, I heard you tell her you was my father. Seems like I knew it all along."

"And you'd *own* me?"

"Own *you?*" cried the boy. "I only hope I can live long enough to make up for some of the things I've thought about you! I know now why mother stood by you against her own kin. And I'll always believe it was her lead me to Dagget's gang!"

"And guided that buckskin down the river to this camp," agreed San Sabe huskily.

The boy nodded soberly. Then his face lighted. "We got nothin' to worry us now. We're goin' on to Wyoming with the Davises and start over—you and me."

To start over! Never to ride dark trails again. His heavy lids closed on misty eyes. San Sabe was dead. The posse had got him back in the river. But Lin Jarvis, was going on to Wyoming to a new life—with his son!

THE END

BRANDS DON'T FADE

By Don Alviso

Brands Don't Fade

SANDY BLUE ran into old man Bascom in front of the stage station in town and threw him a casual, "Howdy, Bill. Then, seeing by the look in the old cowman's face that he'd like him to linger for a few words, Sandy drew over to the edge of the board sidewalk and stopped. Old Bill Bascom had never been talkative, and since this trouble had come on him he was more taciturn than ever, but Blue was one man he would talk to.

Sandy Blue had been around the Bottoms so long he knew all about everybody there. He never wore a star, claiming that all the peaceful folks on the Bottoms knew he was sheriff anyway, and as for the other kind, they'd find it out if the occasion arose.

He felt pretty sorry for Bascom. He knew what the old man wanted to talk about, so he went right to the point.

"Saw your boy Jerry ridin' out of town a while ago," Sandy said. "Headed north, but by the look of him I guess he was takin' the roundabout trail out onto the Fryin' Pan again." He didn't mention that the kid had been carrying what looked like a sack filled with grub.

"Sure beats me," Bill Bascom said tightly, "how a boy with a mother like hisn, and the bringin' up he's had, can cut loose and side with an outlaw like Bart Molin. I hate to admit that a boy o' mine is likely to end up treadin' air."

"It's too soon to be thinkin' thataway," Sandy Blue replied. "I've knowed Jerry since he was a little bit of a shaver. I'm rememberin' how you and his ma brung him up, and I've seen enough, by and large, to convince me that the first brand that's slung on a young un don't rub off easy. Take it slow, Bill, and maybe you can talk some sense into Jerry."

Bill Bascom's broad shoulders seemed to droop a little more under the weight of the trouble that was gnawing at him. "That's just the trouble, Sandy. He won't let me talk to him. Whenever I open up about him sidin' with Molin he just listens till I'm through, not sayin' a word, and then walks away."

Blue noticed a big, sharp-faced rider go past on a cross street and the sight of him reminded him of something he'd almost forgot; though, he told himself, there wasn't much in the close-set eyes and hook-nosed countenance of the paunchy man to remind one of anything, except perhaps a buzzard.

The sheriff left Bill Bascom, went to the livery stable and saddled up. His eye had followed the paunchy rider just far enough to see that he had taken the same trail Jerry Bascom had taken earlier that afternoon. Though there were several places where that trail forked, Blue had a good idea that both men would end up at the same place.

The sheriff didn't take the north trail out of town. He went to his office and dug a bundle of wanted and reward posters from a drawer. He thumbed through the dusty sheaf and finally stopped at one which bore the name, "Repp" and offered a reward of ten thousand dollars. He looked a long time at the picture above the figures and then dropped the square of paper back into the drawer.

On the way out of town he stopped at the general store and bought some food. Then he rode straight east, up through the low pass, and headed for the stretch of desert known as the Frying Pan.

BLUE knew the Frying Pan as well as he knew the top of the boot-scarred desk in his little two-by-four office in town. Local rumor pointed him out as the only man who had ever crossed it and lived. He knew there was only one waterhole within a day's ride of the western edge, and if Jerry Bascom was going out there, he'd camp at that pool by the big steer-head rock. Bart Molin would be there, too, since Jerry was riding to meet him.

It didn't seem so long ago, Blue mused, since Bart had nursed cows on Bascom's ranch along with the rest of the Double B riders. But checking back, he knew it had been all of ten years. The sheriff remembered Bart as a big, blond, lean-hipped hombre, with blue eyes and a friendly face. Bart had been like that when he punched cows on the Double B. It had been during those days that he'd taught young Jerry how to ride and shoot, and Jerry had formed that strange, hero-worshiping affection for the soft-spoken rider who treated him like a younger brother.

But Bart had suddenly left the Double B without telling anyone why or where he was going, or saying goodby, and young Jerry had never believed that Bart had left through any fault of his own. Even when word came back several years later that Molin had gone bad and

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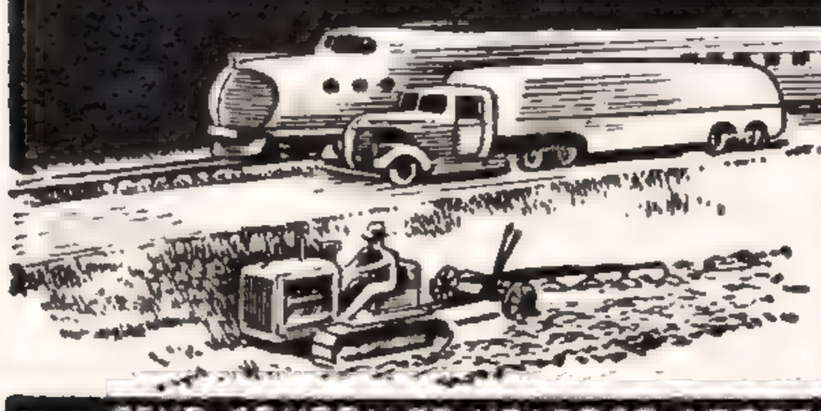

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was wanted at numerous points to the south, Jerry had doggedly maintained that if Bart Molin had killed he'd had good cause.

Sandy Blue had known, even before the boy's father had guessed, that Jerry had gotten in touch with Bart Molin again, and was slipping off into the Frying Pan to meet him and take him food. And Blue, with the wisdom of experience, put it down as only a question of time till Jerry took the turn one way or the other. Blue had lived quite a number of years and he laid his good health to a tendency to mind his own affairs. Bart Molin wasn't wanted in his county and Blue's territory ended where the Frying Pan began. Consequently he hadn't bothered about Molin. But this Jerry business was another matter.

As Blue cleared the pass and took the dim trail out over the desert, dull silver under the slant of the low sun, he tried to fit the hook-nosed man into the picture. The fellow might be just a drifting rider pushing through, and again he might be something else.

Long after the sun had made its quick dip down under the horizon, Sandy Blue pulled up by the waterhole alongside the steerhead rock and got down. He slipped the gear off his gelding and didn't bother to hobble him, because the horse wouldn't stray far away from the grass around the pool.

The chill of a desert night settled down, but it wasn't on account of the cold that the sheriff gathered a pile of wire-brush limbs and built a small fire close to the waterhole. After he got the blaze started he took crackers and cheese and cooked ham from his saddlebag and spread them out on his tarp close by the fire, munching a bite now and then, without much interest, as his gray eyes bored into the flame.

Sandy Blue knew how youngsters looked at things when they got

around the age of Jerry Bascom. Some folks called it the "know-it-all" stage when you couldn't tell them anything, but Blue looked at it a bit differently. Take Jerry now, spilling over with strength and energy and a kid's natural longing for adventure. Raising beefsteak was a pretty monotonous routine, and many a lad before Jerry had broke loose and hit the long trail for no other reason than some unexplainable and uncontrollable inside urge to take life apart and look inside.

Somewhere far off, a coyote howled on a ridge and Blue dropped another handful of broken twigs on the fire. He heard the scuff of hoofs on loose sand and after that the creak of saddle leather.

Then a big wide-shouldered, lean-hipped rider squatted on the other side of the fire and Blue raised his eyes and let them linger a little on the dust-caked face of Bart Molin. As far as the sheriff could tell Bart didn't look much different than he had when he worked on the Double B, though he had only seen Bart close once. Bart didn't look much like an outlaw, but maybe that was one reason he'd gotten by with all he had been chalked up for.

Blue had already seen the hungry hunted look in Molin's blue eyes and noticed Bart cast a longing glance at the grub. The sheriff said, "Howdy," across the fire, and gestured toward the food laid out on the tarp.

Bart Molin nodded and leaned around the fire, reaching out a slim-fingered hand toward the ham and crackers. Blue guessed then that Bart hadn't recognized him and he felt thankful that things had worked out so that Molin had gotten there ahead of Jerry.

For a bit there was only the crunching sound of Bart Molin wolfing down mouthfuls of food. After a while there was the slow, cautious tramp of a horse, slow ridden. That sound ceased and there came a nasal, "Hal-o-o-oo!"

Bart Molin seemed to jerk back and his hand strayed toward his belt as he hunched forward, peering into the darkness. Sandy Blue called out without moving: "Step up, stranger. Room for one more."

The hook-nosed, paunchy man Blue had seen in town moved up and squatted gingerly at the edge of the cone of light, at the sheriff's left. Bart Molin cast a sidelong glance at the newcomer and his lips tightened. The sheriff started tracing aimless figures in the sand with a twig.

"Have a bite?" he said to the stranger. "Or maybe you ate in town."

The sharp face of the paunchy man drew into more twisted lines and instead of looking at Blue he kept his eyes on the meaningless figures Blue was tracing in the sand. When he spoke his voice held the twang of a nasal snarl, as if Blue's seeing him pass through town had been an offense. "Didn't expect to meet anyone out here. I could use a bite to eat."

"You meet people in strange places," Blue replied, handing over crackers and cheese. "Certain things take some of us on the back trails, and who can say whether it's our fault or whether it ain't."

In the short silence that followed, Blue felt the man's close-set eyes watching his hands. He smoothed the sand, erasing the aimless marks, and began tracing new lines with the twig. Now the marks weren't meaningless. They spelled out "$5,000 REWARD," followed by an arrow pointing at Blue himself. The stran-

ger nodded and Blue saw that he assumed that he was an owl-hooter.

THE man reached out a hand and wiped the sand smooth. The move was quick, catlike. Then, with a scrawny finger he traced $10,000 where the smaller figure had been, and eased back on his haunches again. He looked narrowly at Blue and said, "I go by the name of Bart Molin sometimes. Been hangin' out to the south, but it's gettin' too hot down there and I guess I'll go north for the summer." He cast a knowing glance around the fire and Blue knew that he hadn't been referring to the climate when he said hot.

"Some folks call me Sandy," Blue said, taking that long chance because this thing was getting complicated and he didn't want it to hang on until maybe a couple more dropped by. Just as he was thinking that, a voice from outside the circle of light hallooed, and Blue knew that Jerry Bascom had left his horse far back and had come up on foot.

Blue saw Jerry squat close to the real Bart Molin, directly across the fire from the hook-nosed man. The lad exchanged a long look with Molin and both seemed willing to let it go at that. Blue said, "Hello, Jerry," and the kid nodded but didn't say anything.

The sheriff's air was careless and relaxed, but there was a lot going on in his mind. He had things pretty well placed, until the paunchy man had let out that crack about going by the name of Bart Molin. Maybe it was just chance and maybe it wasn't. Picking them quick, men often chose queer names, but it shot the sheriff's plan. If there had been just him and Molin and Jerry, the outcome would have depended on which way the kid turned. If Jerry was still wearing the decent brand Pa and Ma Bascom had put on him, he'd keep out of it. If he'd already made up his mind to go Molin's way, he'd side with Molin, and Blue had weighed that chance back in town before he started out.

But this other fellow's talk had upset all that. It was plain now he wasn't Bart Molin's kind. Bart maybe was bad, but he hadn't rotted at the soul, and the sheriff knew that the sharp, twisted look of the man at his left came from the inside of him poisoning the outside. The real Bart Molin would give warning before he struck, but this man who called himself Molin would strike like a sidewinder.

"Little crowded for a place so out of the way," Blue said, looking over the low flame at Bart.

Molin only nodded and let his blue eyes drift back to the hook-nosed man. Blue knew that the turning point had come. He caught Jerry studying the figures in the sand and he wiped the spot smooth with a sweep of his hand.

Looking at Bart Molin again, the sheriff said, "A kid can make a man a lot of trouble. Fellows shouldn't start ridin' back trails till he's seasoned. 'Tain't the risk he takes himself so much as the danger he makes for them he's ridin' with. Folks stop noticin' a man when he gets past forty, but a kid leaves a lot of sign because it takes the folks back home so long to begin to forget he's gone."

Bart Molin took the sheriff's words in silence, knowing they were aimed at him. Jerry Bascom eased his rump to the ground and straightened out his legs to take the cramp out of them. The sheriff knew it takes years of practice before a man can hunker alongside a fire for hours at a time without his legs going to

sleep from the knees down. Squatted, a man can draw easy; sitting down, he can't.

Maybe Jerry had come out here to meet both these men, but Blue didn't think so. It was one or the other and Blue had to know for sure which. He swung his gaze to the paunchy man at his left. "Would you want a kid trailin' along with you—Bart?" he asked directly.

The sheriff's slanted glance caught the sudden tightness of Jerry's face then, and the puzzled look in his eyes. The paunchy man shrugged, caught the kid's hard look and threw a harder one back. "Ask anybody from Calico town to Temple City. They'll tell you Bart Molin travels alone."

That was all the sheriff wanted. He'd figured this sharp-faced man would talk. His own talk hadn't bettered his chances, but he'd worked it around to where the thing hinged on Jerry Bascom again. If the kid intended to ride on back to the Double B, it would be two against two. If he figured on hitting the back trail, it would be three against the sheriff.

BLUE took his eyes off the paunchy man's gun hand long enough to throw a pointed look at the lean-hipped rider across the fire. "Looks like you've found your man, Bart."

Jerry Bascom heaved with a wriggling motion over onto his left side to get out of Molin's way, but his left boot awkwardly caught Molin's knee as he straightened up, throwing the other off balance and spoiling his aim.

The hook-nosed man had leaped up, too, with the speed of a cat, and his gun was lined with Molin's middle when Blue fired from where he was and the lead riddled the paunchy man's hand.

Blue saw the kid's gun, hammer back, leveled at the man across the

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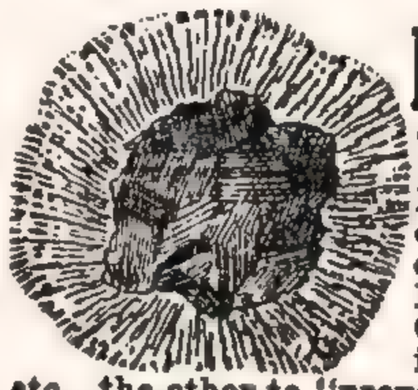

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fire and he heard Molin say, "Put it back, Jerry. The sheriff's handlin' this now."

Sandy Blue, still covering the hook-nosed man, said casually, "Guess you ain't Bart Molin, after all," and then the real Bart reached over and picked up the gun that had dropped from the mangled hand and pushed it butt first toward the sheriff.

The wounded man was tied to the saddle and the other three were mounted ready to ride when Blue turned to Bart Molin.

"You'd have to want a man pretty bad to follow his trail for ten years," he said. "I ain't agoin' to ask you why."

"The law wanted Repp for murder," Bart answered swiftly. "The man he killed was my father. I had that against him before he started usin' my name." He nodded toward the prisoner. "And how does this leave me, sheriff? From what I hear, Jerry is about the only one that believes my story."

"Jerry's judgment is good enough for me," Blue replied. "If this hombre here could have the crust to claim before us three that he was Bart Molin, reckon he's probably the same one that used your name down to the south with the idee of layin' his deviltry onto you."

The sheriff hitched the lead rope of his prisoner's horse around his saddlehorn. "Well, I got to get started if I'm to get into town afore mornin'. By the way, with fall roundup comin' on I wouldn't be surprised if Bill Bascom could use you two on the Double B."

Sheriff Sandy Blue prodded his horse's flanks lightly and started off on the trail. Close behind on the same trail rode two other men, stirrups almost touching. There was silence between them, the companionable silence of two pards who understand each other.

THE END.

Continued from page 94

Lige, if you'd loved this ol' camp the same as we do," Big Bill pleaded. "Somethin' sorta went haywire with our plans—me and Slim's. You'll hafta give us a little more time to raise the dough."

The sheriff pushed back his sombrero and diligently scratched his head. His quick anger had subsided.

"All right," he finally agreed. "I got to go from here to Manzanita on business, and I'll be gone a week. If you ain't got the money ready for me by then, Cinnabar goes to the next highest bidder. And you savvy who that is, Big Bill."

"You're darned tooting he does! It's me!"

The three wheeled to see Mel Dugard standing on the threshold.

"I heard what you said!" he yelled excitedly. He pulled a strip of paper from his pocket and waved it wildly. "This is a check, sheriff, and I order you to accept it and declare me the owner of Cinnabar!"

The sheriff reached out suddenly, clamped a grip on the man's shoulder and yanked him into the cabin.

"Not so fast nor so loud, you!" the sheriff growled. "You want me to tell the crowd how you was rode out of camp on a rail for short-weighin' the boys' gold dust?"

"I'll turn you crooks in to the county auditor!" Mel Dugard raved. "I'll have the bunch of you slammed in the jug! You gimme the deed to this camp, sheriff!"

"Listen, shrimp," the sheriff threatened. "Just afore the boys run you outta camp years ago, one of 'em had a warrant made out for yore arrest. I've still got it. And a warrant's good till it's served. You go back to Juniper and shoot off yore face and I'll serve it as soon as I git back. You got that straight?"

Dugard shot a furious look at the sheriff's stern face. Apparently he saw that the lawman meant business for he slunk away to join the departing crowd.

"Now that we've got him right where he belongs, boys," the sheriff told the partners, "we'll go on where we left off. Pluggin' his mouth don't let me out, savvy? The auditor will demand that money when I show up in Juniper. So it's up to you to get it. Adios, and good luck."

He was the last to ride out of camp. Cinnabar had lapsed into its old-time solitude. Slim stared at Big Bill questioningly.

"Well, don't stare at me that-away," Big Bill said peevishly. "I did the best I could. How was I to know Dugard would put up a scrap like that? I figgered the runt would wilt long afore he did. What did you expect me to do? Stick my tail between my legs and run? Not me!"

"Well, mebbe you'll hafta do it yet," Slim pointed out reasonably.

"Yeah, mebbe I will," Big Bill growled.

Six of the seven days of grace had passed. Big Bill and Slim kept working on their claims feverishly, occasionally glancing up longingly at the hills above camp.

Presently they heard the pounding of a horse's hoofs and looked up to see Pat Healy riding toward them as fast as he could quirt his horse.

"The company's struck dollar dirt, boys!" he yelled.

Slim Weston was too excited to speak. Big Bill stared at Pat for a moment, a broad grin wrinkling his face. He tossed his hat into the air, and the canyon echoed his wild whoops.

"Well, what're you stoppin' here for?" he shouted at Pat. "On to Juniper! Spread the news along the way! Cinnabar's saved! Hooray!" He slapped the horse on the flank and the startled animal lunged away.

Big Bill started on the run for the Last Drink Saloon, with Slim at his heels. They flung themselves at the nailed-up door and sent it crashing inward. In their haste they almost fell down the rickety cellar stairs.

In the meantime Pat Healy was riding as he never had rode before. At the first ranch he came to he changed horses, shouting the news as he pulled the saddle off the dredge foreman's mount and slapped it on a fresh one. He left there in a rolling cloud of dust and was soon in Juniper.

The news he brought to the county seat traveled like wildfire. Men sent messengers to tell relatives and friends in other towns. Placer-mining tools were hurriedly collected and tossed into wagons and buggies or strapped to the saddle strings of restive horses.

THE rush to the new fields above Cinnabar quickly got underway, and before long the first wagons were rolling down the ghost camp's only street.

The vanguard of the rush came to a sudden stop in front of the Last Drink Saloon. The men could hardly credit what they saw, and crowded closer.

Stacked on the saloon steps, and watched over by Big Bill and Slim Weston, were stacks of brand-new gold pans.

"Step up, gents, and buy yore gold pans," Big Bill bellowed triumphantly. "Only ten bucks each. Might's well take in a gold rush without yore pants as without a gold pan."

"Ten bucks each!" one man exclaimed. "Why . . . why, I can buy 'em by the carload in Juniper for a buck each!"

"That's what you think," Big Bill grinned. "Anyway, you might go back there and try yore luck. In the meantime—"

"Hey, I'll take one o' them pans!" another voice shouted. "There ain't a gold pan in Juniper. The hardware man said somebody bought 'em all up some time ago. Hurry!"

"Toss one over here, while you're at it," another miner yelled. "What's ten bucks when the hills is full of gold?"

And so it went, with prospectors fighting with each other to purchase the pans. Some flung down the right amount, while others dropped twenty-dollar gold pieces on the saloon steps, grabbed their pans, and beat it back to their outfits without waiting for the change.

There was only one gold pan left when Mel Dugard came racing along on a badly spent horse.

"Hey, you!" he shrilled at Big Bill. "What'll you take for that gold pan? Quick!"

"Oh, this?" Big Bill replied with irritating deliberation. "Why, Mel, I wouldn't think of sellin' you that pan. No, sir. I'd rather make you a present of it so's you can ride on and stake out a nice rich claim of dollar dirt."

"Cut out the monkey talk and get down to business!" Dugard piped up impatiently. "I'm late as it is. How much you want?"

"Just what I said, Mel. I'm gonna make you a present of it."

Big Bill stooped and picked up the pan. The next instant it was sailing high in the air. As it paused in its flight and started falling, Big

Bill's six-gun gave forth a staccato series of reports. The pan cut erratic capers in the air as one bullet after another struck and drilled a neat hole through it. When it clanged on the ground the prospector picked it up and offered it to Mel Dugard politely.

"Why . . . why, it's worthless!" Dugard shrieked furiously.

"It ain't no different from you, Mel," Big Bill grinned. "Now tie that pore hoss in the shade and give it a rest, or I'll be tempted to bore a few holes through you."

A short time later Sheriff Lige Luton rode up accompanied by a stranger. Big Bill and Slim started piling gold pieces on his extended hands before the startled lawman could say a word.

"Here's yore dough, Lige," said Big Bill. "Got a receipt handy?"

The sheriff stared from one partner to the other in amazement. "Say, you two hombres ain't took to holdin' folks up, have you? Where'd you git all this dough?"

"I got an idee when Pat Healy fergot to buy a gold pan for the dredge foreman," Big Bill explained. "Y'see, Lige, I figgered as how the dredge'd run into purty good pay dirt soon and that Pat would put us wise. Then there'd be a rush, and everybody would want a gold pan. So us three pooled our dough and bought up every one we could lay our hands on. We only made one mistake. We figgered the dredge would strike it afore the tax sale."

"Just a minute, my friend," the stranger spoke up. "I'm hunting for a good location for a store. Give me the pick of the camp and I'll give you a thousand dollars for one lot. This rush will start a boom."

"Hand over the dough," Big Bill said.

"Hm-m-m!" the sheriff observed. "Looks like you don't hafta wash dirt to find gold, Big Bill."

THE END.

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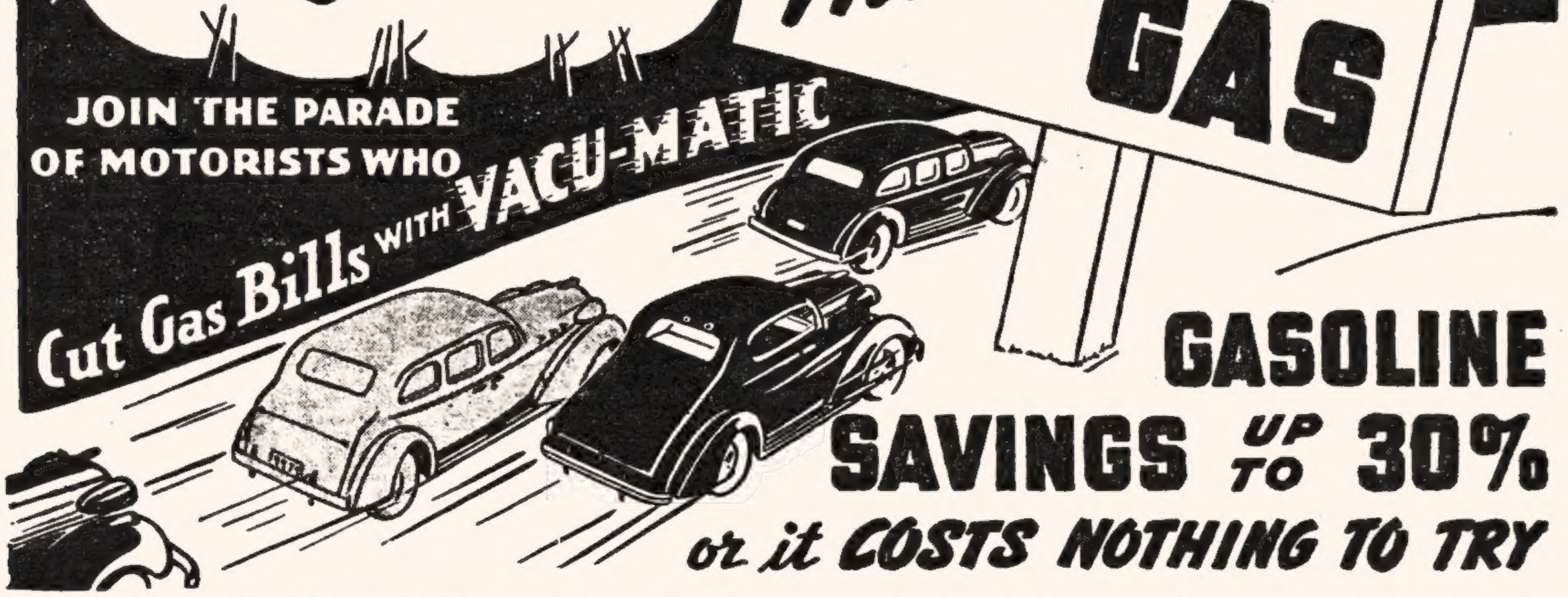

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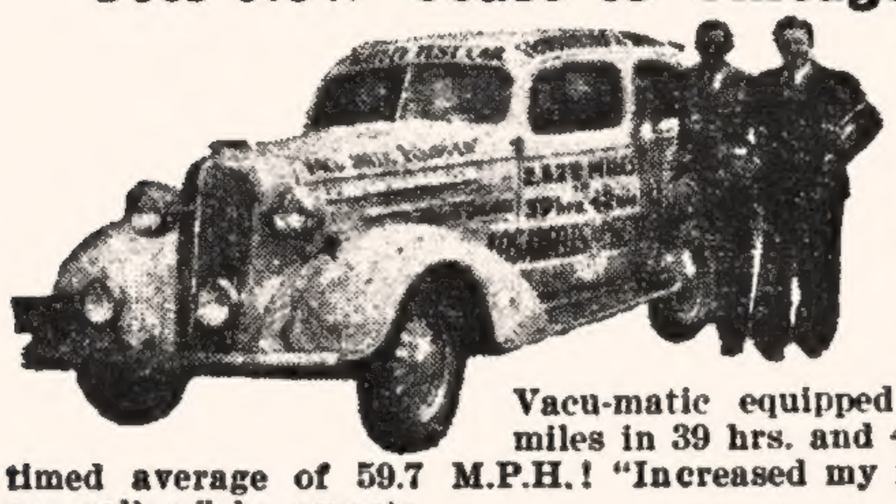

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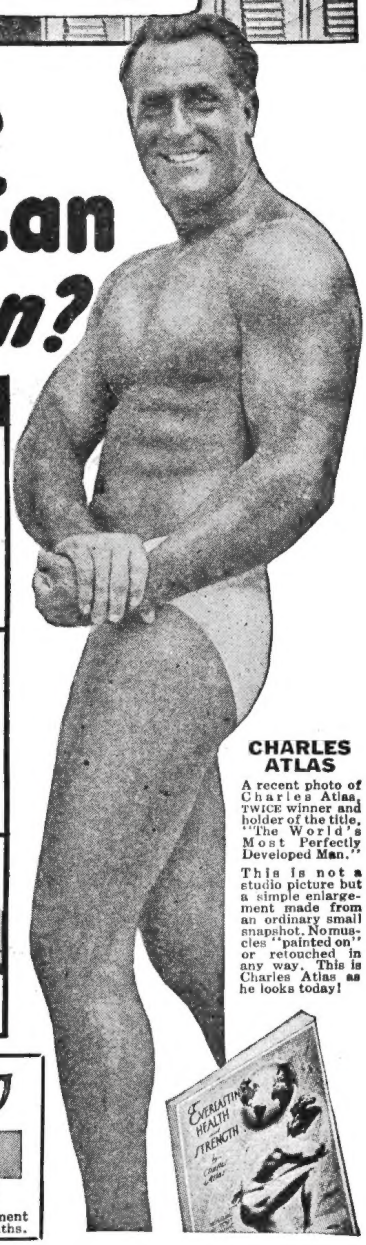

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A recent photo of Charles Atlas, TWICE winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

This is not a studio picture but a simple enlargement made from an ordinary small snapshot. No muscles "painted on" or retouched in any way. This is Charles Atlas as he looks today!

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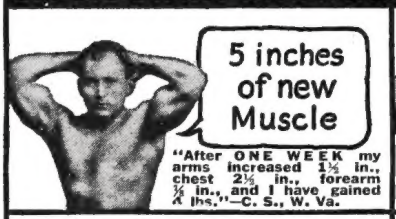
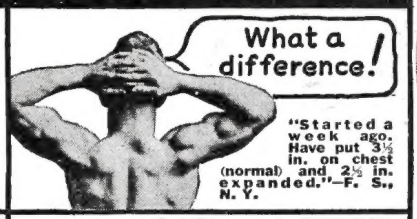
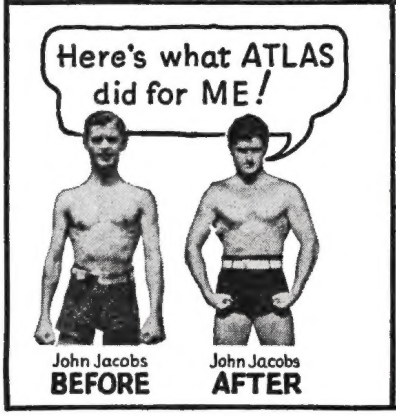


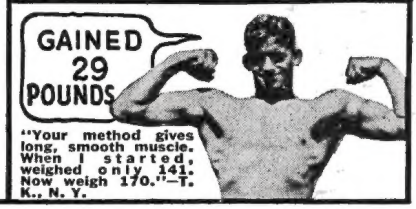
"After ONE WEEK my arms increased 1½ in., chest 2½ in., forearm ½ in., and I have gained 4 lbs."—C. S., W. Va.



"Started a week ago. Have put 3½ in. on chest (normal) and 2½ in. expanded."—F. S., N. Y.



"Am sending snapshot of wonderful progress. Certainly recommend you for quick results!"—W. G., N. J.



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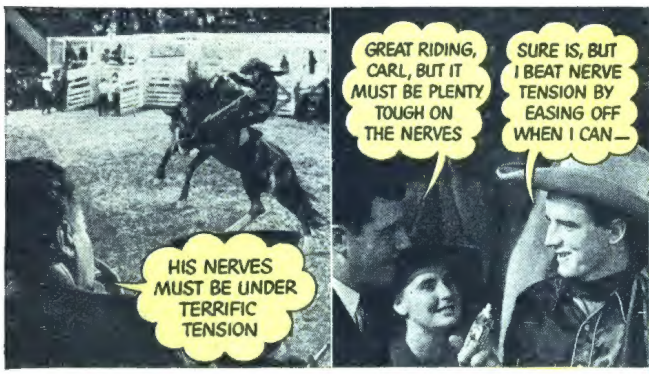
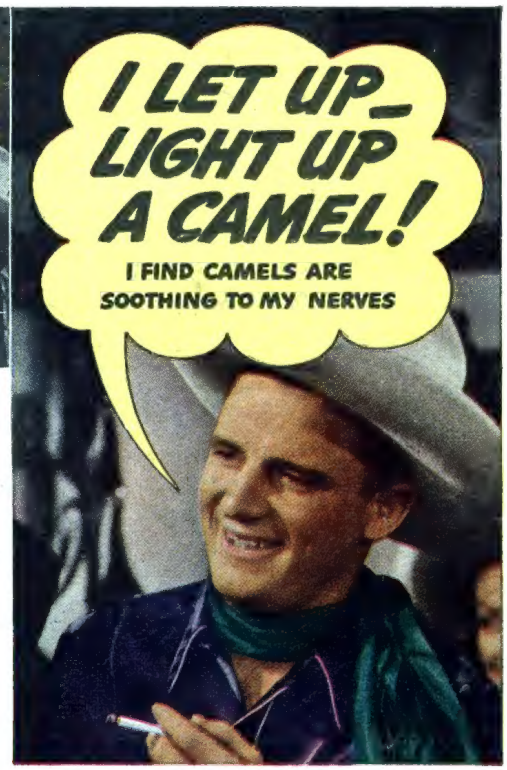
"You bet Stunt Riding is a strain on the Nerves!"

says Carl Dossey, CHAMPIONSHIP COWBOY AND RODEO STAR





"RIDE 'EM, COWBOY!"... and Arizona's Carl Dossey *does*—with the brilliant rodeo horsemanship that's won him two bareback championships in California, and a high-point cowboy title at the big Cedar City (Utah) show. He's pictured above in a breath-taking stunt at New York's Madison Square Garden. No room in *this* performance for tense, jittery nerves! Later, over a Camel, Carl explains his way of sidestepping nerve strain... a pleasant way you'll want to adopt.

MUCH CAN BE LEARNED ABOUT NERVES BY OBSERVING THE DOG

THE English Springer Spaniel (*above*) is speedy, agile—an especially good gun dog. He has a highly developed nervous system remarkably similar to our own... sensitive, high-keyed. But, unlike many humans, this dog doesn't ABUSE his nerves. When a dog feels tired, he rests INSTINCTIVELY! We often let will-power whip us on, deaf to the warning that nerves are getting frayed. Yet how much more pleasant life can be when nerves are rested now and then. Pause frequently... LET UP—LIGHT UP A CAMEL! You'll welcome Camel's mildness—rich, ripe flavor. Smokers find Camel's COSTLIER tobaccos are soothing to the nerves.

NO DOUBT about the nerve strain in Dossey's life. But often we don't realize how tense nerves can get in every-day occupations—perhaps in your own. Miss Ferril (*below*) avoids nerve strain as so many smokers do ... by letting up—lighting up a Camel!

"ACCURACY IS VITAL in my job," says Elsie Ferril, who works all day at an adding machine. "My work requires intense concentration. I can't afford jittery nerves. So, when I feel nerve tension coming on, I let up—light up a Camel. I find this a pleasant way to soothe my nerves."

Smokers find Camel's Costlier Tobaccos are SOOTHING TO THE NERVES

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